



HALLOWEEN PENETRATES CHRISTMAS
(A Young Adult Novel)
SUBHAJIT WAUGH



HALLOWEEN PENETRATES CHRISTMAS

By **Subhajit Waugh**

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About the Author

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Chapter 1

The Prophecy

Before surrendering to his horrific twist of fate, adolescent Jack desperately wanted to consult the village oracle. She lived in an abandoned cave in the dreaded forest, on the village outskirts.

Jack walked through the curtain of waterfall to step into the secret entrance of the cave. He was welcomed by swarms of aggressive bats, fluttering with a menacing gesture, ready to attack his face. The smell of rotting flesh mixed with pungent dampness flooded his nose. Heaps of bones, possibly from sacrificial altar, lay scattered here and there. But his mind was too clouded with the devilish blackmail, for him to focus around. He proceeded to the end of the cave, walking along the long passage, lighted with oil torches, which protruded at an angle from the walls.

Jack avoided stepping on the deadly poisonous vipers and cobras on the moss covered, slippery floor. "I have to find a way out of my terrible doomed fate. I must meet her," Jack muttered to himself as a way of boosting up his courage to step forward, through the hissing and slithering snakes.

Soon, Jack found himself at the entrance of a large, dimly lit, central hall. Its walls were made of huge boulders. He couldn't fail to notice the sharp needle shaped rocks hanging from the ceiling of the cavern.

Jack entered the hall silently.

At one end of the hall, Jack saw an old wooden table, on which was placed a glowing crystal ball, a human skull, dried monkey's paws, one Ouija (planchette) board, a pack of tarot cards and a bloodstained dagger.

A deer was also lying on the table, with its belly slashed. Fresh drops of blood still oozed out, and occasionally its limbs trembled very slightly. A raven and an owl were pulling out the blood-covered entrails and laying them carefully on the table. The cavern smelt strongly of burning myrrh and incense sticks.

The oracle was sitting in a squatting and meditating position on a wooden board, facing the opposite wall. Jack felt guilty at the thought of interrupting her meditation. *I should have taken an appointment* Jack thought or intimated her beforehand. Jack hesitated and appeared in a dilemma.

Without turning her head, she addressed calmly "Ah Jack! I was expecting you".

Jack's eyes widened and his jaws fell in astonishment.

The oracle turned her head and stared at Jack "What I didn't expect though was that you would be so young-barely in your late teens, and so handsome". She kept staring at Jack's fair skinned muscular body, his broad shoulders and shiny-black wavy hairs.

Jack quickly observed that the oracle was dressed like a hippy and partly like a gypsy. She had dirty brown plaited hairs, interlaced with tiger and crocodile teeth and was wearing a necklace of beads. On her back, there was a tattoo of 'Grim Reaper', the personification of death, carrying a scythe in one hand, and a coiled cobra in the other.

She got up from her squatting position. It was only then that Jack noticed she was sitting on a small wooden board with pointed iron nails, instead of cushion!

She stared piercingly at Jack's eyes through her thick glass spectacles, as if trying to get right inside Jack's mind. "One visiting Indian Fakir had gifted this to me" she said, "he taught me to meditate while sitting on this. It is indeed a pleasant experience; it gives complete peace of mind".

Jack barely managed to stammer "pleasant experience?!"

The oracle seemed deeply resentful of Jack's disbelief. "Believe me!" she said with a hurt feeling "uneasy lays the butt that sits on the throne. You shall find complete peace of mind if you sit and meditate on this. Would you like to try?"

"No thank you" Jack refused politely, eyeing it with fear. He was not dying to sit on that luxury piece of furniture! He was desperate for some advice; some urgent solution to his pressing problems.

But the oracle didn't seem at all happy with Jack for refusing to try a recommended pleasant experience. She changed the topic and asked grumpily "Would you like some herbal tea, Jack? I shall prepare you some fresh tea with herbal extracts of cocatine, gilmine and nicasone".

Poor Jack! He was wary of drinking unknown potion-laced tea. "No thanks" Jack replied with irritation. Jack felt that the oracle was deliberately delaying in asking Jack about the reason of his visit. She enjoyed playing with his helpless situation and with his emotions.

This time, Jack's refusal of a 'friendly cup of tea' turned her from grumpy and resentful to visibly angry. "Well then...there! That's for you" she said and offered Jack a toffee.

Jack felt deeply insulted. *Treating me, the spiritual leader of all Halloween creatures, like a child?* Jack's ears turned red with anger, and his face flushed with blood as he tried to digest this deep insult. *Does she even know about my unnaturally long experiences? Did my external adolescent look invite this treatment, or did she insult me intentionally?*

While Jack burned with rage and insult, the oracle calmly watched Jack and seemed to savor and enjoy every moment of it. Her suppressed, cunning smile only added fuel to Jack's burning anger. *Does she realize that ghosts and ghouls and vampires and all other dark Halloween creatures had bowed down before my pumpkin lantern?*

The oracle grew serious. "You seem to have lots of powers Jack" she said with a cold emotionless voice "you shouldn't need my advice". She pointed at the direction from which Jack had entered and said "exit is that way!"

Jack felt shocked and even deeply insulted at this harsh behavior. He felt like a fish that had swallowed the hook, and the fishing reel was in her hand. He was in deep dilemma: whether to swallow his anger and stay, or leave instantly. He started wondering whether he had come to the right place at all.

"You have come to the right place, Jack!" she responded telepathically, and smiled; displaying her blackened metallic teeth "I can trace my ancestral roots to the ancient 'Oracle of Delphi'. I have the blood in me". Her voice had softened a bit by now.

Jack felt some trust and confidence. He thought it wise to consult her.

Jack opened his mouth "I have come to-"

"I know why you have come, Jack!" The oracle interrupted Jack, and then she reflected wisely "Anyone visiting me comes for seeking my advice!" She stared at Jack's eye and whispered, "He, who can outwit the devil, ought to rule the world."

Jack's eyes widened and he stood mesmerized. *Does she really know about my encounter with the devil, or is it just a general remark or a wild guess perhaps?* Jack remained dumbstruck; evidently he had not expected so much. But at the same time he was somewhat skeptical of oracles and soothsayers, and was determined to test the water first. It appeared like he had dipped both his hands in a bucket of water and felt it hot with one hand and ice cold with the other.

"You know about that incident?" Jack asked, unable to control his curiosity.

The oracle simply ignored Jack's question, or maybe chose not to answer it. Instead, she took out a small silver box and a bracelet from her drawer. She took out a pinch of red vermillion powder from the silver box.

"Apply this vermillion on your forehead, and wear this bracelet. It is charmed" she offered them to Jack.

"You know about that incident?" Jack persisted.

"You expected less from me?" the oracle snapped, and then continued in a casual tone "yes, I know it, like everything else".

She paused, and then spoke with a tone of great importance "you must understand Jack- you are stepping into a deadly game, and there is no going back. Whether you like it or not, you are a part of the game now. You have to play your part bravely."

By now, Jack was fully confident that he had approached a competent oracle. She knows her trade. Jack started narrating his story very briefly: the meeting with the Devil in Public Bar; how he tricked the Devil; about his gaining of eternal youth coupled with his eternal punishment.... and about the blackmail by Devil's assistant Beelzebub to join Devil's servitude. Jack also mentioned how Beelzebub took out a 'voodoo' doll with a face resembling Jack's and a needle and played menacingly. Jack also mentioned the embarrassing part when Beelzebub jabbed the needle in the doll's butt, sending Jack dancing around madly and rubbing his buttock for half an hour.

"Does Beelzebub really intend to carry out his threat, or is it merely a bluff?" Jack asked impatiently "What if I refused to join Devil's service?"

"Oh yeah? Really?" she sneered. She looked at Jack with utter contempt. Then she turned away her face, as if Jack was too drunk to ask any sensible question.

"But till now you have obeyed Devil's command by roaming the lonely paths at night with a pumpkin lantern in your hand" she said "Why did you obey Devil's command so long in the first place? Why didn't your revolting spirit wake up long ago?"

"I had always feared being chained in the darkest circle of hell" Jack answered "the circle of eternal torture".

"Continue Jack, I am listening".

"Though roaming alone at night was an eternal punishment, at least I had my freedom". Jack looked down at the floor gloomily "But now, Devil is trying to snatch away my freedom and make me an eternal slave. I shall be exploited to satisfy his whims, which I am sure will be nasty. The punishment I have already suffered is far worse than my deeds. Therefore, I must disobey to avoid more suffering!"

The oracle picked up a birch rod and waved it menacingly at Jack. "Never attempt that, even by mistake, till Devil has the parchment" the oracle warned "you had put your thumb impression with Devil's red ink". She continued with a threatening tone, "You think being chained is the worst punishment? Or do you believe jabbing the 'voodoo' doll with a needle is the worst thing he can do?" She gave Jack a stern look "you are not even aware of what harm he can do with that parchment".

"What harm are you talking about?" Jack asked in a frightened tone.

She took a deep breath "I wonder why Beelzebub did not elaborate!" She glanced sharply at Jack and taking out a matchbox from her drawer, she continued "if Devil throws the parchment in the eternal fires of hell, in the burning embers, then..." she paused and passed the matchbox to Jack.

"Then what..." Jack asked impatiently.

"I can tell you the consequence Jack. But it is better to show. Light a matchstick Jack".

Jack obeyed.

She watched silently as the fire approached Jack's fingers.

"What do I do now?" There was urgency in Jack's voice, as the fire almost touched his fingers.

"Hold on!" she commanded sternly.

"It will burn my finger" Jack pleaded.

"Just hold it on!" she screamed.

All of Jack's attention was now intensely focused on the matchstick as he watched the approaching flame with fear in his eyes.

“Oouuuchhh...!” Jack screamed in pain as the fire touched his finger. He threw away the matchstick and placed his finger in his mouth.

“Aha! The tea is already boiling!” The oracle exclaimed in joy, without paying any attention to Jack. She got up and brought back the kettle from the stove.

“The herbal tea is ready,” the oracle said. “Now let me pour you some hot tea”.

Before Jack could react, she had poured some boiling tea on Jack's shoulder.

“Oooo...ooh!” Jack jumped four feet in the air and went dancing around the hall, rubbing his shoulder with his hand.

“Oh my God! Are you mad?” Jack screamed in agony at the oracle.

“Now calm down Jack!” The oracle replied in a very casual and calm voice.

“I think I have made my point”, the oracle continued “if you can't tolerate this for a few minutes, what shall happen if you are engulfed in the flames of embers till eternity” the oracle paused, and then spoke slowly, pausing several times “You shall be roasted like a turkey in the oven...your skin peeling off...your flesh grilling from inside...till eternity's end!”

“But couldn't you have simply told me without demonstrating?!” Jack was still burning with anger.

“You think roaming in the dark lonely paths till eternity is the greatest punishment?” the oracle said “What if Devil really throws the parchment in the hellish fires of ember? Now is it clear, what is at stake?” the oracle emphasized.

“Considering the ever looming danger, what is the best step I can take?” Jack asked wisely “and that's why I came for your advice” he added.

“If ever you can, just throw the parchment into a normal fire, say a wooden fire” the oracle said “that shall be the end of the agreement. In fact, that's exactly what you should have done in the village pub as soon as Devil changed into a coin, rather than throwing the parchment carelessly in the dustbin” the oracle said in a sagacious tone. “I advise you to bow down before the Devil, temporarily. You are an underdog now. You must rise in power, before thinking of challenging the mighty Devil”.

“In that case, my future isn't particularly bright” Jack observed gloomily “I might never succeed in breaking Devil's chains, leave alone-”

Both of them were startled by the bright flash, which emerged from the crystal ball as it started glowing all of a sudden. The oracle hurriedly pulled out a small bottle and forcibly swallowed the entire content. Then she held the crystal ball in her hand.

“Let me gaze in this crystal ball. Silence! Let me concentrate...Show me crystal ball...show me...” she started slipping in a trance and her voice changed into an unearthly one.

Several minutes passed. There was a hushed silence in the hall, broken only occasionally by the sound of the water droplets dripping from the roof and some distant hissing sounds.

The drink seemed to take effect. Her eyeballs were almost pushing out of her socket; her pupils were dilated to twice their normal size and she was sweating profusely with a suppressed moan.

“The crystal ball shows two bright objects in your hands Jack...one glowing orange object in your left hand, like some pumpkin lantern...and a silvery shining object in the other, looking like the handle of a dagger...both emitting purple hue now...as if engulfed in a halo...both signifies power...great power...Noooooooo! Don't fade away...show me

more...showwww meeooore!" she yelled frantically as the glow started fading. And, as if on cue, the raven turned madly violent, cawed and croaked loudly and chased the owl.

She breathed heavily, with her eyes closed, slowly returning from her trance to normalcy. "You have two great powers with you" she announced loudly as she recovered "Your future is glorious. You shall have unprecedeted fame and glory. My prophecy shall surely come true".

Jack stood motionless, his eyes dazed by the bright light after being exposed to the dark for some time.

You shall have unprecedeted fame and glory. Your future is glorious. Those words were still ringing in Jack's ears. For a brief moment, Jack forgot about his impending doom and gloom. He was feeling ecstatic-an electrifying sensation ran down his spine.

You shall have unprecedeted fame and glory. The word echoed in his ears and resonated in his mind. His heart was thumping with a burst of excitement. *Your future is glorious.* This magical sentence drove away the melancholy and filled his mind with hope and determination, even if it was for brief moments. His ambitions had already been aroused.

"I ask a favor from you" Jack pleaded.

"Yes, Jack? What's it?"

"You are a great oracle. Will you be my mentor?"

"Sorry Jack" the oracle shook her head "but I must refuse. Approach some other mentor for help. I recommend 'Baba Yaga', the great and world famous Russian witch. She lives in a hut resting on huge chicken legs, and all the poles of her fence have human skulls, except one. She guides and advises lost souls. But you must approach her with caution. She always puts the advice-seeker in some really tough test. And whoever shall fail to complete the assigned task shall end up with his head on that reserved pole!"

"I shall follow your suggestion" Jack said "but I request you once again to become my first mentor" Jack pleaded.

The oracle hesitated and remained silent.

"I accept to become your mentor" she broke the silence "but, on one condition".

"What?" Jack asked.

"Your brief story has really piqued up interest" the oracle said "and after what I saw in the crystal ball, I want to hear your incredible story in more detail".

"Is that your only condition?" Jack asked in disbelief. "Is that all you ask in return to become my mentor?"

"Well, there is something else I must mention" the oracle said, unable to bear the questioning look in Jack's eyes. "There is something absolutely charming about you that I can't hide the truth" she sighed deeply to imply the weight of the burden she was trying to conceal.

"What are you trying to hide?" Jack asked.

"When I tried to delve into the crystal ball, I saw a swarm of ravens, cawing loudly and flying in circles over my head. It portends bad omen. Terribly bad!"

"Oh my God!"

"That's why I want to hear about your past to see if I can do anything for you". She picked up a sharp knife and aimed at her pet raven.

"Are you sure?" Jack asked in panic.

“I am absolutely sure that a terrible misfortune shall befall upon you soon” the oracle sighed “but I am not at all sure if I can do anything for you. Now narrate the fabulous and amazing events of your life”.

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Chapter 2

Jack's legendary story: The genesis of Halloween

Brandon Pub, Northern Ireland. 1602 A.D.

“Sign this agreement Jack,” the stranger said “and I will buy you as many drinks as you wish”.

“What shall be the agreement?” adolescent Jack said.

“I shall drown you in finest wine” the stranger replied “and you shall sell your soul to me”.

“Is it a joke?” Jack said warily “who you are?”

The stranger glanced around himself to make sure nobody was watching. Then he removed his sinister looking red mask. His pockmarked face looked even more sinister than his mask. His eagle-beak shaped nose appeared to have been broken at two places. His chin and his joint eyebrows as well, had a Devilish V-shape. He removed his red hat momentarily to reveal goat-like horns on his head. He wore back his mask and hat quickly.

Mr. Jack was stunned to find that he was confronting none other than the Devil himself.

“Nonsense!” Jack shot back, while still composing himself “in return for one time favor, you want my soul? You think my soul is so cheap; a disposable diaper I suppose!?” Jack snapped angrily “Don’t you suppose it will be much more sensible for me to buy my own drinks instead?” Jack looked at Devil with contempt and then called aloud “Waiter!”

A tall, one-eyed man with a grave face came forward, and asked solemnly “May I help you Jack?”

“A large mug of strong whisky please” Jack said.

“With pleasure, Sir” the barman said gruffly “drinking is good for health. It increases appetite, cures insomnia, and makes the burdened mind relaxed” he offered his unsolicited advice. Finding that Jack was not quite impressed with such valuable advice being offered absolutely free, he felt deeply offended. He looked at Jack with an expression of ‘you ungrateful swine’ on his face.

He continued to peruse embarrassed Jack’s face like a thought-reader, and said, “My job demands me to be more professional than friendly. Would you mind, paying in advance?”

Jack hesitated momentarily, then searched his pockets, pulled out a few coins and offered them.

“That’s insufficient for even a quarter of a glass of cheapest rum” the waiter said with a nasty gruff and tossed them back.

Jack sighed with deep disappointment.

Jack searched his pockets again, but didn’t find another coin.

The waiter gave a nasty grin and said "Let me give you a friendly advice: drinking is bad for youngsters. You are too young to get drunk".

"I am already seventeen" Jack replied, "I have attained legal drinking age".

"I am not much bothered about your age" the waiter replied "but I am really bothered that you can't pay for another round, leave alone any handsome tips for me. So, please excuse me. Have a good night".

The barman left abruptly to attend another customer.

"Don't let his words break your heart, Jack" Devil said "it's just his duty his to keep an eye on everyone in this pub".

"I'm sure he keeps an eye on everything" Jack mocked at Devil's insincere sympathy "it has to be an eye only" Jack said, pointing at one of his eyes "in case you haven't noticed!"

Jack called the waiter back and said "I can't pay the outright amount, right now. But trust me; I shall pay it next time".

The expression on the face of the barman changed.

"I know how to deal with penniless customers like you" the barman said with a stern voice "Get out peacefully before I kick you out".

The barman left angrily, uttering obscene slang.

Jack sat gloomily, looking depressed.

Devil patted Jack's shoulder lightly, and said with a friendly tone "Never mind his rude words. I will offer you a free drink".

Jack's face brightened up. But the very next moment, the joy faded from his face. "No, but thanks!" Jack replied gloomily.

"I am well aware that..." Devil said "...without a strong drink, you will have to toss and turn in your bed miserably tonight, getting neither any sleep, nor any relief from your raging sorrows. A whole night of bitter torment! Like a gasping fish out of water".

Jack remained silent, and looked extremely uneasy.

"Now come on Jack" Devil said "why won't you accept my friendly offer?"

Jack fell silent, holding his chin, lost in deep thoughts. A few moments later, Jack said, "If it's only a friendly offer and not a bargain, then I accept your friendly offer, and shall remain grateful".

"I don't want you to remain grateful" Devil objected bluntly "All I want is your signature".

Devil unfolded and stretched a parchment on the old wooden table. Then he picked up an ashtray and an empty bottle of rum from the table and placed them on both ends of the parchment to keep it stretched.

He took out a feather quill and a small inkwell from his red overcoat pocket. He dipped the quill in blood-red ink, and offered the quill with a smile.

Devil bent his forefinger and tapped at the bottom of the parchment "Now sign here please! Then drink merrily like a fish".

Jack held the quill and stared blankly at the parchment.

Next moment, Jack stood up abruptly. "I have changed my mind" Jack said, "I must leave now".

Jack took a few steps towards the door and stopped near the threshold. He couldn't take another step forward. He clutched his head with both his hands, and stood silently in

a deep dilemma. He jealously stared at an old man sitting alone in one corner and merrily drinking from his large mug.

A few moments later, Jack turned back and occupied his seat.

Devil was keenly observing Jack. "Why you are so afraid to sell your soul Jack?" Devil said.

"The price you ask for a drink is absolutely unacceptable" Jack complained.

"Why do you regard your soul as so precious?" Devil said, "Go to any grocery shop or a moneylender and try to barter your soul. Would you get a penny for it?"

Devil pulled out an oversized black cigar from his overcoat pocket and lighted it. He puffed at it from the corner of his lip, through the small opening of his red mask.

Drumming his fingers on the table, Devil said, "Only generous people like me, trade for such worthless stuff, with the sole intention of helping people in distress".

"If helping people is your sole intention, why do you bargain for something?"

"Simply to make them feel that they have traded something" Devil said "You can always hold your head high by feeling like a trading partner and not a beggar". Making a smoke ring, Devil said "But for me, it is like selling a prime land or a precious diamond for a penny, just for the sake of making a deal".

"Now don't worry Jack" Devil assured "people at your young age should be fearless. So leave aside all your worries-you will lose nothing by signing this".

Devil rolled up the parchment, got up, and announced in a warning tone "Well, this is my offer. Either accept it or leave it. I am leaving now".

Jack's was craving for drink; just like an unfortunate traveler lost in the scorching dry desert craves for water. The more he struggled with his inner self to say 'no', the more desperate he became to grasp the offer, which was now slipping from his fingers. Jack had no time to ponder. He had to decide immediately.

"I can't sign my name" Jack said "If I put my thumb impression, will it be enough?"

"No problem!" Devil replied "but put your thumb impression with this red ink".

"I shall put my thumb impression. But I have one condition" Jack said "since you demand my soul as your payment, I too demand you as the bartender's payment. I mean, not your money, but you yourself".

"What do you mean by saying, 'I should be bartender's payment'? I don't understand". The burning cigar dropped from Devil's fingers, perhaps in surprise or in deep confusion.

"I heard that the Devil could transfigure according to his will. I want to see it through my own eyes" Jack said. "You transform into a coin with which I can pay the bartender. And when the bartender falls asleep..." Jack explained "... You can change back to your original form and escape".

"Is there any particular reason behind this uncommon wish?" Devil demanded. The way he stared at Jack through his mask confirmed Devil's deep suspicion. He perused Jack's adolescent face silently, trying to reach a decision, and then nodded his head.

"You wish to see me change into a coin?" Devil asked in a soft tone "Is that all you wish?"

"Yes!" Jack replied. "The miser barman keeps a vigilant account of each and every penny. I would love to see the rascal barman lamenting over unaccounted loss of money when he wakes up. It will be such a fun! Can you imagine: The waiter refused to offer a drink to a known person like me?"

The Devil must have thought: *it's just a silly request to see some magical transformation, before selling his soul forever! Or maybe, he just wants to play some trick with the barman to have his revenge. In any case, it is a great opportunity for me! A soul for eternity in return for a little magic and a one-time drink! I simply can't miss this opportunity!*

Having made up his mind, Devil called aloud "Waiter! Two mugs of strong drink for both of us!"

* * *

Half an hour later, Jack was staggering towards his way home. As usual, he held a pumpkin-carved lantern, with a glowing lamp inside. It emitted a ghostly flickering light, illuminating the dark as he stumbled along the cobbled road.

A subdued but shrill voice was emerging from Jack's pocket "Oh please remove your silver crucifix-it's hurting! Take me out of your pocket". It sounded like an earnest pleading. "Please set me free. I wish to transform back again".

"Oh really?!" Jack mocked "But why should I let you go free so easily?" Jack let out his scoff and ridicule through a laughter, and said "To let you help people in distress in return for their soul, I suppose?!" Jack focused much emphasis on the word 'help'.

Jack turned a deaf ear to all those begging for sympathy.

"Please set me free. Please..." the pleading tone changed to a cry for pity.

"When somebody is under your power" Jack said "they say figuratively 'the person is in your pocket'. Now I have the 'Father of evil' in my pocket; literally. Stay forever deep in my pocket as my pocket money. Besides, a talking coin is cool".

However, after a while, Jack lost his cool and looked irritated from the non-stop whining and pleadings. Jack placed his hand on his pocket. "You made a deal. Now it's my turn!"

"Oh whatever you wish" the voice emerged again from Jack's pocket "this crucifix is burning my skin!"

"Of course it will burn the skin" Jack said, "crucifix is supposed to fix the Devil. That's why I have placed you with my crucifix inside my pocket, so that you can't transform back".

"Please set me free" a shrill pleading emerged again from Jack's pocket.

"Then promise me that you won't come back to bother me for one year" Jack said.

"Oh yes; of course. I agree!"

"Well then, that's a deal. I set you free now." Jack took out the coin from his pocket, and tossed it on the side of the road.

* * *

Jack went to bed, rejoicing at the thought of outwitting the Devil, and having at Devil's expense enough drinks for a peaceful night's sleep.

At that moment, Jack had forgotten all his miseries and sorrows of his daily life. He was only thinking how cleverly he got rid of the Devil, possibly forever. After all, Devil will simply forget their trivial encounter within one year. Jack felt merry as a bird, as he pulled over his blanket.

* * *

Tap! Tap! Tap! There was a knock at the door.

Jack woke up rubbing his eyes, looking confused. He did not feel so happy now. He had a hangover from last night's heavy drinking, and a throbbing, aching head.

Thud! Thud! Thud...! The knocking at the door turned to banging, and was now loud as gunshot.

Jack recoiled with fear. He jumped out of bed, muttering "oh my God! He has come again, so early in the morning! This is a bolt from the blue!"

Thudd! Thudd...! Clank.....the latch broke and the door flung open.

Standing outside was a man of medium height and strong built, dressed like a hunter. He was wearing a khaki hat and khaki half-pant and carrying a country made double-barreled gun.

Without any formality, he stormed inside and holding the barrel at Jack's chin, he demanded angrily "well Jack? Have you arranged it yet?"

"Oh please Sir, give me some more time" Jack pleaded "I shall repay every penny!"

The man struck Jack with the butt without any warning. Jack fell on the floor and screamed "Ooouchh!" He writhed in pain holding his chin and nose, as blood gushed out.

"That's a lesson for you! I don't want to hear excuses. I shall break every bone of your body, the next time we meet".

Jack lay on the floor clutching his jaw tightly in agony.

"I give you three days' time, Jack". He softened his voice and whispered "why don't you sell your agricultural land to me? You shall get a good price for that worthless chunk". There was a glint of greed shining at the corner of his eyes.

"Oh please Sir! That's the only piece of my ancestral land left" Jack pleaded "and besides, my part-time job as a blacksmith hardly provides enough to feed myself. I shall starve to death. I simply can't afford to part with that land".

"Very well, then! Pay your debt immediately!" He pointed his gun on Jack's head "you can't hide your money from me, you swine!"

"I am not hiding my money" Jack was desperate "whatever I had; I spent on the treatment of my sister. I spent all my money. Due to grinding poverty, I couldn't even continue the life-saving treatment..." Jack's voice choked with deep emotion.

After the moneylender left, Jack appeared helpless and almost collapsing with grief. He took out an old withered parchment from the drawer and looked at his twin sister's face. Tears rolled down his cheek in her sad memory.

Ever since Jack's father died, leaving him and his sister completely orphaned and penniless, Jack had been struggling to keep himself and his sister alive. And after the untimely demise of his beloved sister, Jack didn't even have a shoulder to cry on. It was then that Jack started drinking in his late teens.

Jack felt a compelling urge for a swig of strong drink, to drown all his sorrows. He couldn't bear to think of pawning his only plot of land to his moneylender.

Jack decided to visit Barbarossa, his childhood friend. Surely, he may be able to suggest a way out, or arrange a suitable buyer. Even if he had to pawn with his last piece of land, Jack was determined that it shouldn't fall into the hands of his greedy moneylender.

* * *

One year is a long time-span, long enough to erase an incident from human mind.

One year is a short time-span, too short to erase an incident from Devil's mind.

Therefore when Jack met Devil again, he was unprepared for fresh trouble. Devil, on the other hand, was fully prepared for a bout, fortified with a vow, not to be tricked by Jack again.

“Good morning Jack. I am sure, you are glad to meet me again!”

“Oh yes! Glad to meet you”. Jack stammered; his voice conveyed a feeling of deep uneasiness. Devil’s face was the last thing on earth Jack might have wished to see, especially without a mask. How horribly evil the face looked!

“I hope you are fine!” Jack said, while looking desperately for a way to slip away.

“Thanks for enquiring about my health” Devil said with a nasty grin “Why don’t you let me join your company? We can walk together. After all, we are walking in the same direction”.

“You mean you are traveling to the village pub with me?” Jack asked hopefully.

“A bit further. Towards hell, to be more precise! The path to the bar, ultimately leads there anyway”.

“To hell?! At this fine morning hour! You must be joking!”

“No, my dear friend! I have been waiting impatiently for this moment for whole one year. Your exemption period expired yesterday midnight. And, by the way, I still hold that agreement parchment with your thumb impression”.

“But, I haven’t taken my breakfast yet. And I am feeling awfully hungry” Jack said, “Why don’t we stop at the bar, have some breakfast, and one round of drinks?”

“I wish I had laced your drinks with deadly hemlock juice or arsenic last time” Devil said. His face turned fierce like a hungry, attacking wolf “You would have got what you deserved for cheating and drinking at my expense. But I am awfully sorry now, my dear friend” Devil said “Not another round of drinks now. You can’t trick me with drinks a second time”.

“At least, we can stop at a plain restaurant, so that I can fill my stomach?” Jack pleaded. His tone indicated that his hopes were dying.

“Sorry Jack! My carriage waits outside the village. So, let’s walk faster and you can have a small welcome meal at the banquet hall of Hell” Devil spoke in a determined tone.

Without hoping for any concession from the Devil, Jack resigned to his fate.

Soon they crossed the village-pub, the windmill, the village signpost, and were now walking by cherry and apple orchards.

“I am almost starving” Jack said, eyeing the ripe apples “would you kindly allow me to eat a few apples?”

“Why not?” Devil sneered, “I’ll love to see you munching those apples and cherries and this tasty fruitcake too!” Devil said with a bitterly sarcastic tone, holding a small cake.

“Really?” Jack said hopefully.

“No!” Devil replied. The cake crushed in Devil’s palm. A grinding sound emerged from Devil’s jaw, and his jaw muscles twitched.

“Only a few apples, Sir” Jack pleaded, “Please Sir.”

Devil kept his mouth tightly shut and grinded his teeth.

“I heard that you generously let Adam eat the juicy fruit when god kept him hungry” Jack said “Be generous to me sir”.

The expression on Devil’s face changed visibly. The hard lines on his face softened, as if by some pleasant remembrance of the past.

“Alright, but be quick. I don’t want to be late” Devil replied “and I warn you Jack, this is the last time you are seeing sunlight. Smell the fresh air and fill your lungs to the utmost. Henceforth, you’ll live with these memories only, draped in dungeon chains”.

“I’ll be fast as a breeze” Jack said, and ran to the nearest apple tree. He climbed up hurriedly a few feet above the ground, but lost his grip and slipped down.

Devil glanced at his wristwatch and remained silent.

Jack grasped the trunk in a tight embrace, and climbed up slowly, inch by inch, by pushing his bare feet against the trunk. Devil watched his progress impatiently, growing restless with each move.

“Hurry up, you loathsome wretch!” Devil shouted “I don’t have the whole day for you!” and stamped his foot in anger.

“Yes Sir, just a few moments more...” Jack replied, “The trunk has become slippery due to rains”.

“Is it so?!” Devil reacted harshly as he observed Jack, pulling himself up unsteadily, and breathing heavily.

Jack reached the lowest branch, and grasped it desperately like a drowning person. His feet slipped, lost contact with the trunk, and he remained hanging from the branch with the fingers on both his hands locked against each other and his feet hanging two meters above the ground. Desperately, he tried to pull himself up, and managed to place one of his feet on the branch.

When Jack managed to place his other feet on the branch, he looked more like a corpse, tied by his wrists and feet to a thick pole and being carried on shoulders. Devil looked at him with deep contempt and irritation.

Jack’s fingers unlocked suddenly and he fell down on his butt with a thud.

“You clumsy oaf!” Devil roared, “You wait, I’ll climb the tree and fetch you some apples”.

Devil grasped the trunk, climbed up fast, and started plucking apples.

Jack got up, marked an imaginary cross on the trunk with his finger and then taking out the silver crucifix from his pocket, he stuck it on the tree-trunk.

“What are you doing?” Devil shouted at Jack “I have got stuck to the branch!”

Jack smiled and ignored Devil.

“Let me come down!” Devil pleaded, “I’ll give you the finest, juicy, ripe apples”.

“Set you free in return for a few apples?” Jack laughed “No, Thanks! Now watch this” Jack walked away to the nearest apple tree, and climbed up swiftly like a squirrel. He plucked two apples, and displaying them to the Devil, he took a large bite.

“You swine! You.... you rascal!!” Devil screamed.

“Swear as much as you like” Jack said, “Now, you are as helpless as an insect on a fly-paper. You can’t even move your limbs”.

“Set me free” Devil shouted with a mixed tone of anger and pleading, “I am feeling weak and dizzy”.

“Neither am I feeling great from starvation” Jack said. “You are stuck, so breaking free is your headache. Why do I bother? My concern is to fill my empty stomach”. Jack concentrated on the apples, oblivious to Devil’s struggle.

Jack turned deaf to Devil’s pleadings. But soon the whining of Devil turned too irritating for Jack to ignore. “Last year, it was entirely my fault that I felt pity on you and

let you transform back from a coin" Jack said loudly, hoping to shut Devil's mouth "I won't repeat that mistake".

"But I did reciprocate by allowing you to eat apples; didn't I?" Devil objected "Was that my guilt, for which I am being punished?" Devil whined with louder intensity.

"Let me put it this way" Jack said "Last year I let you transform back from the coin. I paid the price for your freedom by parting with the coin in my pocket. But did you pay me back with my own coin? I mean, did you treat me in the same way as I did? Would you have ever set me free, had I not managed to stick you in that tree?"

Jack finished eating, climbed down, and started walking away.

Devil started yelling "Set me free! I am ready to accept any of your conditions".

Jack stopped, thought for some time and then shouted back "then promise me, that you will never take my soul to hell".

What other option did the Devil have, but to yield submissively?

* * *

Jack was only eighteen now, but had already picked up the habit of frequent drinking to escape the harsh realities and sorrows of his life.

Jack woke up one night and felt much lighter. He picked the glowing pumpkin lantern from the table, and proceeded towards the dressing room.

Holding his lantern, he went to the mirror, expecting to find his eyes reddish from heavy drinking. He raised his lantern, and as he looked at the mirror, he screamed with horror.

He saw his face, semi-transparent as a mist, as if he was made of smoke! Jack gazed at the mirror, paralyzed with fear.

He lowered his lantern, and pulled up his gown. Instead of his feet, he saw a trail of thin smoke from his waist downwards, which tapered like a snake's tail and vanished just before touching the ground. He was hovering in the air.

He glided back effortlessly to his bed and found that he had left his body behind!

His first reaction was complete shock. He remained motionless, watching his own lifeless body. Only now, he truly appreciated how handsome it looked, with long, black, wavy hairs, good muscular build and fair skin.

"My whisky must have been adulterated with poisonous wood alcohol!" Jack whispered.

Jack broke down in a sob. He hid his face in his palm and wept bitterly. *What have I done! Why did I ignore the risk and friendly advices and continue drinking? Why didn't I see my end coming so soon? Oh my God! I am too young to die. If only I had a second chance to rectify!*

It took quite some time to recover from the shock. Slowly, he calmed down, and finally accepted his fate. Jack prepared to leave this world forever, and enter the other world.

* * *

Jack's soul was denied entry at the Gate of Heaven. The reason given was his heavy-drinking lifestyle.

"But I have sworn to become sober!" Jack strongly protested, "My drinking habit shall go to the grave with my body."

"Entry into heaven is decided by a lifetime of actions and not by one's deeds after death".

The only other ‘Final Destination’ Jack knew was the Gate of hell, towards which, he proceeded with a sullen face.

“So why have you come, Jack?” Devil demanded furiously, and without waiting for a reply, he shouted “If you have come, to gain entry into hell, then my answer is: ‘No! Never!’ Do you understand? I shall remain truthful to my promise, and never take your soul to hell”. Devil’s eyes glowed like red-hot charcoal with revenge “Do you think I’ll ever forget your dirty mischief, Jack?”

“But where do I go?” Jack pleaded.

“Back from where you came”, Devil roared “and you shall be doomed to roam the dark marshes and lonely roads at night, till eternity’s end. That’s my command”.

Devils softened a bit, and said “But wait Jack! You shall need an eternal fire to light your unending dark paths. Here, take it...” Devil scooped out some burning embers of hell from the fireplace with his hand-shovel, and placed it inside Jack’s pumpkin lantern.

“And remember!” Devil warned Jack, as he was leaving “if ever you disobey this command, I shall break my promise and send you to the lowest circle of hell-the circle of eternal torture!”

* * *

Jack placed the pumpkin lantern on his table, and re-entered his own lifeless body. Almost instantly, the inert body came to life and he rose up, as if nothing had happened.

He looked at the mirror and was amazed to see that he looked even more handsome now. There was something extremely attractive about his face now, like Adonis of Greek mythology. He touched his own hair. It felt much softer. He had heard stories about eternal beauty and youth of vampires and human undead, which rose up from their coffins, but never believed it till that moment.

Jack thought, he had a dream.....but no! The pumpkin lantern with the glowing embers inside, was an undeniable proof, and reminded him what had happened.

“It’s too good to be true!” Jack muttered. He took out his Jackknife, and cut his finger. Blood gushed out and he felt acute pain. *This is not a dream!* He placed his finger in his mouth. Then he fell on his knees and with folded hand he prayed “O my Lord! You have given me a second chance! I swear I shall never drink again”.

Almost instantly, it flashed in his mind *there is still some whisky left in the bottle.*

Jack rushed forward, fetched the bottle and placing it on the floor, he muttered, “I feel like pissing in the bottle!” He kicked the bottle so hard that it struck the wall and shattered into pieces, spilling the whisky. The strong smell of whisky gave him a nauseating feeling, a sudden disgust, as if he would instantly vomit.

Jack roamed alone in the marshes all night, pondering. *It is a death and rebirth experience for me. I have become sober from a drunkard.*

Jack had the whole night to ruminate. *I am technically a ‘corporeal undead’ now.* Jack concluded. *But what have I become-a zombie; or maybe a vampire; or perhaps only an undead human?*

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Chapter 3

Tick-tock: Time flies so fast

Days turned to months, months to years, and years to decades. Jack had no other real option, but to obey Devil's command and roam alone in the darkness of the night, carrying his pumpkin lantern. Jack's aging had stopped completely after his 'death and rebirth' experience, and he always appeared to be in his late teens and eternally handsome.

Jack was wandering alone one late night, carrying his pumpkin lantern, when he happened to pass along the solitary hut of an ancient Celtic druid. He heard a mournful wail, and rushed inside the hut.

Jack found an old druid, lying alone on his deathbed and moaning feebly. Jack sensed instantly that he was so feeble that he could not even turn around or move his limbs. A smell of urine hung in the air.

On seeing Jack, he moaned "water...water...I am dying of thirst".

Jack placed his pumpkin lantern on the table, and fetched a glass of water from an earthen pitcher from one corner of the hut. Then he gently quenched the dying man's thirst.

"Throughout my life, I have cured ill persons, saved life, and performed the rituals of 'oak and mistletoe' to raise new families..." the druid said with a deep sigh "...and now I lay alone counting my remaining breaths. How I wish I were surrounded by friends and family at my last moments!"

Jack felt the acute pain of loneliness of the helpless soul from his own experience of unending lonely nocturnal roaming.

"I can feel my death approaching fast," the Celtic druid said in a feeble voice. With much effort he clasped Jack's hand and made an ardent request "Promise me that you will give proper respect to my dead body".

Jack remained silent. Then he spoke in a mournful tone "I shall give you a proper burial". Jack kissed his own silver crucifix and said, "May your soul find eternal peace".

"No!" the druid protested, "Our clan of Celts don't bury the dead, but cremate them. Promise me a proper funeral". He paused, gasping for breath and then said, "We Celts don't pray for eternal peace, but we believe in re-birth. All soul is reborn and is returned to the cycle of life".

Jack wiped his tears. He controlled his emotions and said with a determined tone "I promise you a proper funeral".

"You have a big heart" the druid said "only a sensitive person will bother to care for a dying old stranger at the dead of the night, and shed tears for him".

The Celtic druid tossed and turned in his deathbed, showing signs of breathlessness. It was clearly visible on his face that he was wearing out his remaining strength. "I have no successor" he spoke with great effort "You must have been sent by God at my last moments. Before I breathe my last, I adopt you as my own son".

Jack could no longer hold back the tears flowing down his cheek.

"Before I close my eyes" the druid spoke with great difficulty "I wish to hand you over my most valued treasure, which I inherited from my father...which has been passing down for generations in our family...There, remove that brick from that marked spot on the wall..." the druid pointed at a black spot and fell silent.

Jack stepped forward, picked up a rusty crowbar and removed the brick. He found a small rusted tin box placed inside a small hollow. He fetched it back, opened the lid, pulled out an old paper and gazed at the pale, lifeless face of the dying druid.

“Our Celtic God of the dead controls the dark world and spirits of the dead and he can also let them haunt wild at night. Now unfold that paper!” the druid spoke with an energetic burst of excitement, just like a candle, which burns brightest, just before burning off.

Jack unfolded the paper and saw a Wicca pentagram symbol and a verse on it.

“That verse gives authority over the dark world” the druid spoke in one breath “but only when uttered seven times at midnight in a lonely graveyard, on the waxing gibbous phase of the moon, when the wolves howl seven times, and the owl hoots thrice...and...and...” the voice of the druid choked and he closed his eyes. He was breathing desperately like a drowning person. He muttered something almost inaudible, which feebly sounded like”...and on sighting a shooting star”.

“Getting all that combination together is an extremely rare event” the druid sighed “I had been waiting for that rare moment for my whole life, but didn’t find it”.

He grasped Jack’s hand tightly and said, “As my adopted son, you must promise me to respect our ancient tradition. You must dress in scary costumes like ghost or zombie or skeleton during the month of ‘Samhain’ to frighten away evil spirits. Swear to me”.

“I swear” Jack said.

The old druid smiled with intense gratitude and breathed his last.

Jack held the druid’s wrist between his fingers and found that his heartbeat has stopped. Jack closed his eyelids gently and kissed his own crucifix.

* * *

Jack was doomed to roam the dark lonely paths of Ireland till eternity on Devil’s command.

Jack kept his promise to the Celtic druid and dressed in scary costumes during the Celtic month of ‘Samhain’. But people outside the Celtic Druid’s locality were not aware of this ‘Samhain’ tradition, and things went awry.

When a lonely traveler saw adolescent Jack, dressed as ghost and carrying the ghostly-light emitting pumpkin lantern, he shuddered with fear. He spread horror stories about Jack to his relatives and friends like a contagious disease. Others, who met a zombie or a skeleton carrying a pumpkin lantern, also spread the words like scarlet fever.

Even those who never met Jack, enthusiastically told scary stories about Jack, describing him as a monster, or a stingy middle aged man with a heart of stone, or a Devil-incarnate or God knows what! And the listener in turn would add more spices, a pinch of salt and swear that every word was true, and was only recounting his own horrific experience.

In the eventful year of 1846 A.D., Ireland came under the spell of the ‘Great Potato Famine’. Thousands of Irish people started immigrating to North America. Since Jack had no hope of a change in fate, he decided that he should try for a change of place. He managed to grab hold of a ticket, and boarded a ship, bound for North America.

* * *

In the new world, Jack started residing in an old wooden mansion, in a Mexican settlement called ‘village of the dead’ in the ‘Great Lakes’ region.

Jack was roaming alone in a haunted cemetery one midnight. Jack was completely unaware of the horrific reputation of that cemetery, where unidentified corpses were often buried without a proper ritual. There were rumors that dark creatures lurked in that cemetery at midnight and corpses rose from their graves.

Jack was startled by a hooting sound.

Jack searched for the origin of the sound, and spotted an owl sitting on a tree. Jack saw a corpse hanging by its neck from the branch of that tree.

A howling cry came from nearby. Jack shuddered in alarm.

“Wolves!” Jack whispered, as the howling grew steadily louder. The howling cry ended with a hyena like laughter.

“Oh my God!” Jack whispered as he froze with fear “Those are not wolves but a pack of werewolves: at least half a dozen of them!”

Jack stared at the moon to see if it was full moon, when werewolves turn particularly ferocious and feed on carcass or raw human flesh. Jack was surprised to find that the moon was in the gibbous phase.

An eerie silence followed, broken only occasionally by the chirping of cricket insects.

The owl hooted again. The howling cry followed by hyena like laughter appeared to come from all directions. Jack was being surrounded by a pack of hungry werewolves, and they were closing in on him. Jack felt his heart thumping in his chest, and a chilling fear made his hair stand on end.

Jack prayed and gazed at the heavens hoping for a miraculous rescue. He saw a shooting star. “Must be an omen of providential rescue,” Jack whispered.

Something struck in Jack’s mind like a lightning flash. He rushed to the nearest grave and sat down in front of a tombstone. He recited the verse, which the dying Celtic priest had given him.

Another volley of howling sound broke the deadly silence of the night.

Jack recited the verse again in panic. The owl hooted again, with an unearthly blood-chilling tone.

Drops of sweat appeared on Jack’s forehead and his mouth went dry out of fear. He recited the verse again.

Jack heard soft creaking noises all around him. He watched with horror as the lids of several half-buried coffins moved, and shadowy smoke-like figures rose and soared up from the buried coffins.

Jack closed his eyes, gathered all his courage and recited the verse again...and then once again.

All around him, corpses were rising from their graves and crawling out.

Jack recited the verse one last time.

A gust of wind sent the dead leaves and twigs hurtling on Jack’s face. Then everything stopped abruptly.

The zombies and vampires came closer, knelt down in submission, and bowing down their heads, they said to Jack “Give us your order, young master”.

“What!?” Jack stammered.

“We are your obedient servants” they said in unison. The hovering ghosts cried in a shrill voice “Master! Master!” Some of them were clanking their rusty iron chains.

“We will obey you and raise you our dark army from far and wide,” they said.

The werewolves came forward and said “From now onwards, we will follow you like shadow throughout the night”.

“Oh my God!” Jack stammered again. His hands were still trembling uncontrollably, whether from sheer relief or excitement is difficult to tell. He groped for something to instill back his courage. He picked up the pumpkin lantern from his side.

Instantly the dark creatures bowed down to the pumpkin lantern. The ghosts whizzed and glided through the air, raising cries of excitement.

“What is that glowing object, which attracts us just like insects to the flames?” they said “And what is your name young master?”

“Call me Jack!” he replied, swallowing his fear “and this is my pumpkin lantern... I call it Jack-o’-Lantern”.

Jack’s ‘pumpkin lantern’ started becoming famous throughout North America and then worldwide like wildfire. The village fortune-teller removed his Mexican ‘sombrero’ hat from his head as a sign of respect, and made a bold prediction “one day, Jack will change the tradition of the entire world”.

The residents of Jack’s Mexican village stopped celebrating the ‘Day of the dead’, their annual event of Ghost worship, and started hanging ‘Jack-o’-lantern’ in front of their homes. They started calling Jack as ‘Jack-o’-Halloween’ and changed the name of their village to ‘Halloween village’ to show their respect to Jack.

True to his ever-adolescent heart, Jack started the tradition of trick-or-treat in his own village, just as a childish prank. The fortune-teller was right again: it soon spread far & wide.

Jack was surprised to meet his childhood best-friend, Barbarossa, one day, quite by accident in the new world. Barbarossa had become an undead human and stopped aging after his twenty-seventh birthday, and had migrated to America. Jack was overjoyed. On Jack’s request, Barbarossa started staying with him. They made a perfect pair, although Barbarossa looked a decade older than Jack and was shorter in height.

* * *

Several decades passed since Jack landed in America. He still looked in his late teens and handsome as ever. Even the natural glaze on his wavy hairs had not faded.

“Eternal youth often comes to someone, who has sold his soul to Devil” Barbarossa explained to Jack one day “Besides, vampires and undead humans often have unnaturally long lifespan-I mean ‘indefinite life span’. They are still prone to accidental death or intentional death, but immune to aging and hence natural death”.

Jack was damn sure he was just an undead human and not a vampire, since he hated the sight and smell of blood. Besides, while combing his hair, he could see his own image in the mirror, which a vampire can’t.

This status quo continued indefinitely until on the thirteenth of a month, on a Friday, when the mirror slipped from Jack’s hand and was shattered into exactly thirteen pieces.

“A terrible omen! It portends disaster!” Barbarossa said “Our peaceful world is going to be shattered very soon”.

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Chapter 4

Seeds of Christmas rivalry

“What is your intention in delaying matters?” Mrs. Santa Claus protested to her husband “Are we not getting too old?”

“Have you really grown old?” Santa Claus asked the question humorously as he looked over his eyeglasses and smiled at her.

“Stop teasing me!” Mrs. Santa reacted in an irritated tone “Just look at the mirror and see for yourself, how old you have become!”

“Well, five centuries is really an unnaturally long span for someone to start ageing...” Santa Claus continued “Mary dear, when I migrated to this continent, I had hoped to discover ‘the fountain of eternal youth’ here in Warm Springs in Georgia” Mr. Santa sighed “I learnt later that it lies somewhere in Florida, which, to my great disappointment, I never found out!” Santa sighed again “So, we are doomed to grow old”.

“Now don't change the topic!” Mrs. Santa snapped in a caustic tone trying to bring her husband on track “You must urgently consider starting the ‘Santa and Mary Claus Memorial Trust’ at the earliest to take care of Christmas gift distribution in near future”.

“Well honey, don't you think it isn't suitable time yet?” Santa tried to calm down her excitement “especially when the Elves are going on frequent strikes and closing down my toy factories and workshops”. Mr. Santa let out a deep sigh.

“And besides, honey” Mr. Santa continued, “We have come here on vacation, to escape tensions. So I really don't want to consider all these things now. Remember what the doctor said, when I had a heart stroke last week?” Mr. Santa glanced at her and continued, “he said ‘no tension and complete rest’. Yes, those were the exact words the doctor said”.

Mrs. Santa kept her mouth tight shut and grinded her teeth. She was breathing heavily and seething with anger at the thought of losing argument with her husband.

Santa Claus ignored his raging wife, looked through the window and spoke calmly “look, how beautiful the pine trees on the mountain look! This ‘Santa Lodge’ here in ‘warm springs’ captures my heart. Ah, I believe this place is really good for my heart. All I want is to relax”.

Santa Claus reclined himself on the soft-cushioned easy chair, and took out a Havana cigar from his cloak.

Mrs. Santa pounced on him instantly, snatched away the cigar, threw it on the floor, squashed and crushed it under her shoes, and spit on it. Then she pulled Mr. Santa's white hair really hard, as if to verify it wasn't a wig.

“Oouuchhh...!” Mr. Santa screamed. “What was that for?” he demanded in a protesting tone.

“Don't you remember what the doctor said? He said ‘no smoking!’ It is absolutely forbidden for a heart patient!” She waved her finger threateningly at Santa and reminded, “it is time for your daily dose”.

Mr. Santa's face became pale; he nauseated as if he was about to vomit.

“Oh honey, can't you pour it through a funnel directly into my throat?” Santa pleaded, “The medicine tastes so horrible!”

* * *

It was midnight, when someone appeared at the gate of the building adjacent to ‘Santa Lodge’. On the massive Iron Gate, a nameplate was hanging: **Knecht Ruprecht**, Personal Secretary-cum-Manager of Santa Claus.

The security personnel informed Ruprecht that the person was absolutely adamant to meet him, to deliver an urgent message to him, personally.

Ruprecht ordered the security to search him thoroughly for any hidden weapons, and then send him to his door.

A few minutes later, there was a knock at the door. On opening the door, Ruprecht found a man wearing white hood. The man requested that he should be allowed to come inside immediately, and the doors be locked.

Ruprecht asked him to take a seat and offered him drinks, which he politely refused. Also, equally politely, he refused to remove his hood.

The man began “Sir, I worked as a spy under the guise of a clerk for Santa’s supposed Russian ally ‘Ded Moroz’, here in American branch. I have defected from comrade Moroz’s camp with many valuable documents”. The man pointed at his briefcase, but held it tightly, as if someone would snatch it.

“So you worked as a spy for Moroz!” Ruprecht said like a lawyer cross-examining a witness. “Tell me truly” Ruprecht said “Did you pass on any valuable documents of Mr. Santa to Ded Moroz as well?” From Ruprecht’s voice, it appeared that he was not only determined to trace any leaked secrets, but also confirm that the person’s claim of being Moroz’s spy was true. “You must tell me!” Ruprecht persisted in a firm tone.

“I didn’t pass any important secrets” the man replied.

Ruprecht didn’t seem to be satisfied with the answer, but didn’t grill him further.

“These documents will prove beyond doubt that Ded Moroz is carrying out spying activities on Mr. Santa Claus” the man continued “and hatching secret plots against Father Christmas, the British ally of Mr. Santa. In fact ‘Ded Moroz’ is Mr. Santa’s worst enemy under the guise of a friend”.

“Judging by your voice, you seem to be very frightened” Ruprecht said.

“My life is in great danger.” the man replied “Moroz’s agents must be searching madly for me. I seek refuge here, and I am ready to disclose all my secrets”.

“Now calm down” Ruprecht assured him “You need not be afraid anymore. I assure you full protection”. Ruprecht paused and corrected his own words “but only if you spill all the beans. You must sing the full song; not in parts to suit your own interest whatever it is”.

Ruprecht sipped his soft drink, softened a bit himself, took a deep breath, and said, “You have indeed done a praiseworthy and heroic job, by trying to expose what you believe is wrong. You need not feel guilty of betraying your camp. Now tell me what you want to tell”.

The hooded man began “Ded Moroz has been placing spies among Santa’s elves for spreading dissatisfaction and rumors and creating rift among dark and light elves. Thanks to Moroz’s efforts that there is a whisper circulating around ‘Santa is growing plump on the blood and sweat of his worker elves’. He has been bribing union leaders and high ranking elves of Santa’s toy factories to slow down production”.

Ruprecht stared at him with his eyes widening, as if he had just been awakened from a deep sleep with a rude surprise. The man observed Ruprecht’s reaction keenly through the opening of his hood.

“Besides, Moroz has been stealing other corporate information of your master’s factories”. He paused for some time and spoke hesitatingly “Ded Moroz plans to steal

vast amount of money from Santa's secret vaults and Swiss bank accounts. He has already bribed top level gnome bankers for this purpose".

Ruprecht listened with keen interest, till the man took a long pause.

"Is that all?" Ruprecht said.

"Ded Moroz plans to finance many of the dissatisfied elves, who are on the verge of revolting, with those Santa's own money".

"Is there anything else left which you should disclose?" Ruprecht said "or do you want me to keep interrogating you incessantly?"

The hooded man came very close to Ruprecht and whispered something in Ruprecht's ear.

"God! These are serious issues" Ruprecht said "needs immediate action". Ruprecht said excitedly in fragmented sentences. Then he spoke firmly "I shall inform my boss, Mr. Santa, immediately. But I shall require all your documents in original".

The hooded man bowed down his head and silently handed Ruprecht his briefcase.

* * *

Next morning, Ruprecht pushed the door and stormed into Santa's room excitedly, without even knocking. Without any greetings or compliments, he exclaimed, "Sir, a 'terrible thing' has happened".

Santa put aside his newspaper, glanced at his face calmly and asked, "What's it?"

"Sir, these documents! Just have a look at these!"

Santa glanced through those documents, and to Ruprecht's great disappointment, he showed no excitement. Not even a frown!

Ruprecht pressed on that Ded Moroz has placed spies in Santa's ally, Father Christmas's office. Besides, Ded Moroz has also bugged Santa's cousin Sinterklaas's castle in Southern Spain.

"How can you believe an anonymous person?" Mr. Santa said dismissively "Huh Ruprecht! It is just a hoax by some trickster". Mr. Santa almost tried to get rid of Ruprecht and continue with his newspaper. "Ruprecht dear, he might have just taken advantage of your child-like gullibility and narrated a cock and bull story".

But Ruprecht was adamant. "Moroz has already made detailed plans to disrupt toy supply from your workshops and factories to your cousin Sinterklaas" Ruprecht said.

"Leave me alone" Mr. Santa said, trying to focus on the paper.

"Sir, we must take immediate action" Ruprecht said, "Needless for me to tell you that your cousin Sinterklaas is immensely rich but lack production facility. He depends solely on you for supplying toys and gifts to Netherlands and adjacent countries. And once he gets ousted, Ded Moroz can easily gain monopoly in all those regional markets".

Mr. Santa looked deeply irritated and remained silent.

Ruprecht pulled out an envelope, and said "Sir, just have a look at these photos....."

Quite unwillingly, Mr. Santa Claus pulled out a black and white photo and glanced at it casually.

He stared at it for a long time, as if trying to recollect something. Moments later, he blurted rather excitedly "Ruprecht.....Oh my God! This seems to be-"

Before he could complete, Ruprecht sighed, and continued, "Yes Sir, you are right! Sir, this photo was developed from microfilm provided to me. It clearly shows the interior of your cousin's steamboat 'Tjesboot12'. I am so worried to think what Ded

Moroz's plans can be: to place an explosive or to hijack the steamboat or God knows what!"

"Are you sure?"

"Sir, I have an earnest request" Ruprecht ignored Santa's question and continued, "The spy who has defected from Ded Moroz and provided all these proofs, should be provided immediate protection".

"I don't think so. I shall talk with Ded Moroz and try to find out a diplomatic solution" Mr. Santa replied. "After all, Ded Moroz is my Russian counterpart and my ally. I don't want to strain my relation with him. If we should provide shelter to that spy, it will certainly spoil my good relation with Ded Moroz".

"Excuse me Sir!" Ruprecht snapped "But, don't you suppose, you are making a grave mistake in believing Ded Moroz is still your friend?"

Ruprecht stared hard at Santa's face and said with a grave tone "Sir, the spy who asked for shelter is threatening suicide if you refuse asylum". Ruprecht's tone grew more apprehensive as he continued "I came to know that he attempted to chew his cyanide capsule yesterday night in a state of mental depression".

"But providing him shelter will only irritate Ded Moroz" Mr. Santa said "I really don't want to get into bitter relation with Ded Moroz. I am too old now to desire trouble; so old that, I have even stopped counting my age long ago" Santa Claus said, while rubbing his hand lazily on his fat belly, "So let the spy find shelter somewhere else. However, I shall meet Father Christmas and my cousin Sinterklaas, and show them all these documents".

"There is something more" Ruprecht hesitated as he spoke "Moroz had a secret affair with your wife in the distant past. He always had a deep grudge in his heart for losing her hand in marriage to you" Ruprecht's hesitation was turning into a stammer "Now Ded Moroz eyes her with deeper interest and wants her in his harem to make up for his past loss".

"What nonsense!" Santa shouted, losing his temper abruptly "Leave my room instantly!"

"Oh yes, I will!" Ruprecht shot back angrily, unable to hold back his frustration any longer. "Sir, I wish you had showed this same bold attitude while dealing with Moroz as well" Ruprecht's voice rang with adamancy.

Mr. Santa stood dumbstruck and stunned by the attitude of his normally submissive secretary.

Ruprecht left Mr. Santa's room with a heavy heart, sighing disappointedly. When he reached his own office, he immediately issued orders to his subordinates to search and arrest as many spies and agents of Ded Moroz as possible. He ignored Mr. Santa's decision and granted refuge to that anonymous spy. Ruprecht felt proud of himself for acting tough and completely disregarding the possible consequences.

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Chapter 5

The Conference

The two 'Christmas gift-distributors, Mr. Santa Claus of America and 'comrade' Ded Moroz of Russia took their reserved seats across the ivory carved round table, while the

reserved seat of Father Christmas of England was vacant. They were holding the historic talks at 'Le Grande' palace in the sunny, Black Sea resort.

Mr. Santa looked plump and jolly with trimmed white beard. He was wearing red coat and red trousers with white cuffs, black leather belts and boots, and a red pointed fur cap.

Ded Moroz was wearing an aristocratic, blue 'Czarist' cap on his head. He was holding a silver staff, which he reclined on the chair. He had excessively long, wavy and thick, white beard, reaching up to his knees and he was dressed in heel-length, blue 'fur coat' with gold buttons.

"How distinct both of us look today, wearing our favorite colors!" Mr. Santa opened with a silly comment.

Ded Moroz ignored his remark and said, "You look healthy. Oh, and how is your wife?"

"My wife?" Santa Claus fumbled at this unexpected question "she's fine".

"I wish her health" Moroz said, "You have got more in your life than you deserve-a lucky rascal I must say" Ded Moroz offered his compliment with a hearty laughter. "I remember watching both of you dance at the prom; her youth and beauty settin the stage on fire".

Mr. Santa felt his adrenaline shoot up and giving him a burst of temper. *Moroz had an affair with her in the past* Ruprecht's words flashed in his mind *Moroz has a deep grudge for losing her hand in marriage* another shot of adrenaline pumped into Santa's bloodstream *Moroz wants to make up for the past loss-wants her in his harem*. Santa's thumping heart and his rushing blood had flushed his face red.

Santa Claus pulled the rein on his burst of mad temper. He thought it best to hide his raw feelings and completely ignore Moroz's pinching and pinpricking remarks. He decided to act ignorant of lied inside Moroz's heart and focus on this important meet. If Moroz thinks I am completely unaware of his feelings towards my wife, let him stick to his foolish belief. Protesting will make him alert that I have come to know a lot about him. Mr. Santa concluded.

It took several moments for Santa Claus to recompose himself. He forced a smile on his face and decided to face this historic moment.

"First of all, I congratulate you on this historic occasion" Mr. Santa said with a sweetest tone possible "Weihnachtsman has been ousted, and his dream of domination of the 'Christmas World' is finally shattered. Now we can divide his German territory among ourselves".

Ded Moroz rose up from his seat and started rampaging to and fro, making loud thudding noise with his Russian 'Valenki' boots. Then he walked towards the table, on which a globe of the world was placed.

He gave the globe a brisk spin and watched it spin rapidly. "Yes, business talks first!" Moroz said, "Regarding division of territory...let's come directly to the point".

Ded Moroz paused and then spoke in a louder, clearer and more determined tone "I want exclusive gift distribution rights, over Poland and Romania...and more importantly, I want complete demarcation of Soviet territory and Western Europe, so that there won't be any encroachment" he grasped the spinning globe with both his hands "and then we can divide the rest of Weihnachtsman's Germany equally between ourselves".

Santa Claus was dumbstruck, as if he received a sudden blow without any warning.

Recovering from the initial shock, Mr. Santa said “Is such a demarcation of Soviet territory and Western Europe absolutely essential?”

“Oh hell, Yes!” Ded Moroz replied stubbornly.

“You see...” Mr. Santa stammered “...my intention in calling this conference was to discuss means of peaceful coexistence for both of us-“

“Peaceful coexistence?!” Ded Moroz repeated with a severe frown “Can two tigers coexist peacefully in the same patch of forest? Or can two swords stay happily in the same sheath?”

“Can’t we be friendly?” Santa said.

“Certainly” Ded Moroz shot back “but remember: a strong fence in between makes good neighbors”.

“But nowadays” Santa said “the free market concept-“

“Now listen, dear Santa” Ded Moroz interrupted instantly “I dislike encroachment on our Russian territory. Even at a microscopic level, salesmen and burglars and professionals operate in their well-defined territories. We are talking at a global level. How can you extend your sphere of influence over the entire globe without clashing with the interests of others?” Ded Moroz’s tone conveyed that he was fast losing his temper.

“But it is all about gift distribution” Mr. Santa stammered, “It is about free donations and ‘giving away’. Conflicts is supposed to arise only when the question of ‘taking away’ arises, isn’t it?”

“Hah! Don’t teach me that you are just a generous philanthropist, who goes about distributing gifts without any self-interest. I am in the same business myself and I spend an immense fortune annually, for the same unspoken purpose” Ded Moroz snapped furiously “Doesn’t other ‘gift-distributors’ have the same goals, dreams and great ambitions like you?”

Ded Moroz lowered his tone and said “And besides, may I ask how you accumulated such a vast wealth in the first place, to go on with your show act of distributing gifts?”

Mr. Santa’s face turned pale, and he quickly tried to change the subject “But earlier, the demarcation postponement was almost agreed upon, orally. Poland and Romania which you now demand, were supposed to be regarded as disputed lands”.

“Well, we can draw new boundary lines” Ded Moroz said “After all, the boundaries are not engraved on stone!”

Santa Claus opened his mouth to say something, but failed. He stiffened his voice and said, “At best, all I can do is dropping my own claim, but regard those two as buffer states. It will be a fair compromise, which is in accordance with your idea of a strong fence”.

“But I can’t agree with that status!” Ded Moroz shot back harshly “Poland and Romania are an integral part of Russian territory”.

Ded Moroz poured himself some ‘Russian Vodka’ and finished it off with one gulp. “People in Western Europe have already started believing that Santa Claus is synonymous to their traditional gift distributors like ‘Father Christmas’ and ‘Saint Nicholas’. I strongly object over my identity being replaced by yours”.

A stunning silence followed.

A few moments later, Mr. Santa Claus announced to Ded Moroz in a submissive voice “I shall consider your demand favorably, and of course, very seriously”.

“I hope so!” Ded Moroz announced triumphantly.

“I think that should satisfy you completely, Dear Moroz” Santa said.

Ded Moroz grunted and didn’t reply.

Mr. Santa Claus didn’t appear to be very happy over his own announcement, but didn’t raise any conditions either. He was looking depressed at losing a chunk of territory to his competitor for maintaining peace. He simply turned his face and stared at the golden cage hanging by a long golden chain from the ceiling. He observed the chirping finches and kept quiet.

After these brief conversations, they hotly debated on other pressing matters, like forming a ‘World Association of Christmas Gift-distributors’.

The heated conversations were still going on, when two waiter Elves entered the hall, carrying large golden and silver trays. Both were about three feet high and had long pointed ears and tennis ball sized, protruding eyes. Both were dressed in green uniform with shining service badges above their shirt pockets and pointed fur caps. One of them was very fair skinned, and the other one was pitch black.

They placed the trays on the table. There were cups of ‘Café au Lait’ and ‘Darjeeling tea’, Yorkshire puddings, Madeira cakes, cream-coated mushroom pizzas, salted cashew nuts, Mexican milk cakes, and cold soups.

The light-skinned Elf clapped his hands and uttered “Light!”

Immediately, the lights of the hall became dimmer and Persian candles on silver chandeliers lighted up on its own. The colors of the walls and the themes of the life sized portraits on wall frames started changing. The conference hall started resembling a dining hall.

The duo took a break from their debate joyfully, and grasped their favorite pieces of edibles from the plate. Ded Moroz started munching as if he was in a great hurry (Evidently, the ‘Russian Vodka’ had raised comrade Moroz’s appetite). He was almost gulping off the ‘Okroshka’ from his china bowl.

All of a sudden, the bowl slipped from his hand, fell on the jaded marble floor and was shattered into pieces, spilling the soup.

The Dark Elf looked angrily at the Light Elf and spoke in a commanding tone “Now clear up this mess and mop the floor”.

“How can you command me?” The Light Elf replied, “We both are in the same post. And besides, I have seniority of service”.

The Dark Elf shot back with bloodshot eyes “How dare you argue with me?! You pale skinned, inferior race!” he fumed with anger as he spoke “You ought to have been assigned the job of a cleaner or maybe a sweeper” He demonstrated using an imaginary mop-stick “I wonder who appointed you as a waiter...” He looked at Mr. Santa momentarily, with deep disgust. If you are taking salary, you must offer your service without complaint. Or else, take voluntary retirement, and leave us. We are so sick of you people mixing with us!”

By now, the Light Elf had lost his patience. “Speak not of salary and service to me” his reply gave out his rising temper “you Dark Elves go on mass strikes more frequently in Santa Claus’s workshops”.

Mr. Santa Claus stared at the Dark Elf over his spectacles.

The Dark Elf turned away his face and spoke stubbornly “Our demands are very genuine. And, besides, till completely separate boarding and dining arrangements are made for Light and Dark Elves, we shall continue to go on strike!”

“Oh yeah?!” the light elf shot back “You got to be kidding-“

Mr. Santa gestured the Elves to leave. They complied, but with a deep grudge that their voices were unheard, and their brain-dead master ignored their complaints.

It must have been a great embarrassment for Santa that his servant Elves should quarrel openly and invite Ded Moroz’s suppressed delight. After all, Mr. Santa had taken lots of efforts to organize this conference flawlessly. But, since, now the cat was out of the bag, he decided to discuss matters further.

“I had other matters to discuss with you; dear Moroz” Santa Claus said, “Your propaganda about worker’s rights is spreading unrest among thousands of my worker elves. They are going on strikes, closing down my toy factories, and making lots of impossible demands”.

“I strongly object to this, dear Santa. Their demands are very genuine” Ded Moroz said. He gave a piercing look at Mr. Santa and continued, “They want better pay, less working hours, job security, retirement benefits and so on. It is only this very few things they are demanding. If anything is to be blamed, it is your capitalistic attitude! They whisper on your back ‘Our Santa is growing plump at the expense of our blood and sweat’. Yes that’s what they say”.

Santa Claus quickly hid his embarrassment and tried to defuse the situation “Well, maybe it is the centuries old rivalry between Dark and Light Elves, and has nothing to do with ideological conflict”. He paused for a breath and continued, “It seems we should have another meeting soon. Is my summer residence, in the Korvatunturi Mountain of Lapland, agreeable?”

“No! No! That won’t be possible for me” Ded Moroz responded “I am an old man, and my doctors have advised me, not to undertake long trips. Or else, I would have accepted your proposal and this meeting would have been held in some Mediterranean island instead”.

Ded Moroz poured himself some fruit punch and continued in a complaining tone “You always travel comfortably on your flying reindeer sledge. But my journey on my Troika horse-carriage is quite jerky and tiresome. So I don’t prefer to travel too often, and rather stay in my nice official residence in Veliky Ustyug”.

“Before we part, I have something more to discuss” Santa Claus said “Our ally, ‘Father Christmas’ of England, is unable to be present here due to pressing reasons. However he had asked me to represent him at this meeting. We haven’t yet shared any of our newly gained German territory with him!”

“That’s perfectly okay!” Ded Moroz replied bluntly “Both of us will be left with a larger chunk, if we make two divisions rather than three!”

“But won’t it be unfair to leave out ‘Father Christmas’ empty handed?” Santa Claus said, “After all, he was quiet helpful in ousting Weihnachtsman”.

“You may share some of your territory with your English friend if you wish” Ded Moroz replied playfully in a humorous tone. “But I am not inclined to part with an inch of my territory!” announced in an irate tone.

“Maybe, we can discuss about this in our next meeting” Santa Claus said hopefully.

“What we should rather have on our agenda is ‘Eastern Europe’” Ded Moroz spoke firmly “I must demand a sphere of influence over all children of Eastern Europe”. He finished off his fruit punch and corrected his words with a punch “Actually they are children of Russia”.

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Chapter 6

Devil's Plans

The minutes of the 'Santa-Moroz' conference reached Devil's global headquarter at Pandemonium within three hours and forty-five minutes.

Devil called a meeting with his chief advisor and secretary, Beelzebub. After some preliminary round of discussions, they came to the point.

"I think we should start exploiting the territorial conflict between Santa Claus and Ded Moroz immediately" Devil suggested.

"Shouldn't we wait patiently for the opportunity to ripen?"

"Such passive patience suits only a patently bedridden patient!" Devil blurted his favorite tongue twister and growled.

Biting the stub of his black cigar, Devil said, "The door of opportunity is already wide open. By trying to satisfy Ded Moroz's demands, Mr. Santa Claus has simply flared up his ambitions. Mark my words: Ded Moroz is not only planning to compete with Santa, but dreams of replacing Santa Claus completely from the Christmas arena".

"What would you like me to do now?" Beelzebub asked.

Devil appeared surprised at this abrupt submissive reaction from his non-budging advisor. Why should his good but partly selfish advisor suddenly turn docile?

"Clapping with one hand isn't possible; neither is one-sided enmity sustainable for long" Devil said. "Therefore, heavily bribe some close person of Santa Claus to defect to Ded Moroz this time. Instruct him to make no distinction between facts and lies in his confessional disclosure, as long as our purpose is achieved".

Devil closed his eyes and let out a smoke ring, filling the room with a strong smell of tobacco. "Let that person spill the beans about Mr. Santa's secret plans and reveal some alarming plots to Ded Moroz. This will surely boost the 'Santa-Moroz' rivalry and our own project shall proceed smoothly".

"Your wish is my command" Beelzebub bowed his head.

Devil looked warily at Beelzebub's docility, as if almost aware of 'something else' brewing in Beelzebub's mind. Devil appeared to be trying to figure out the striking point of his advisor's hard-bargaining tactic. "Would you like to share some of your thoughts, Beelzebub?" Devil made his gambit move.

"As per your instructions, I have thoroughly examined a list of possible candidates for heading this project" Beelzebub said, "obviously, 'Krampus' tops the list in qualifications".

Beelzebub handed over the list to Devil. He waited for a few moments for a response from Devil, but getting none, he continued, "Krampus is definitely the most suitable candidate for this task. As you are very well aware, he was the right hand person and spymaster of Weihnachtsman. He is ruthless and ambitious.....and besides, he has access to lots of dark secrets of both Santa Claus and Ded Moroz".

"I thank you for your selection" Devil replied, "Krampus is indeed very suitable. But I have made up my mind". Devil removed the cigar from his mouth, puffed out slowly, and tapped the cigar over the ashtray.

"May I ask whom you wish to appoint?" Beelzebub said.

“As my advisor, you have right to know. I shall appoint Jack...I mean...Jack-o’-Halloween”.

“Jack-o’-Halloween!” Beelzebub exclaimed “Jack-o’-Halloween, my lord?” Dissatisfaction appeared on Beelzebub’s face like a child denied his birthday present.

“That’s right!” Devil said “all the dark forces respect him and pay homage to his Jack-o’-Lantern, especially on Halloween night. Jack is undoubtedly the ‘pumpkin King’ of Halloween!”

“But does he suit our purpose?” Beelzebub blurted.

“Why not?” Devil replied “First thing to consider is, Jack had sold his soul to me; so he will be nothing more than a puppet. Secondly, despite his huge popularity in the dark world, he doesn’t maintain a ‘standing army’ of dark forces. It suits me perfectly. He has a little power to protest. Thirdly, by appointing him in my service, we can automatically gain an upper hand over the dark forces as well. Nice kills with a shot, isn’t it?”

Beelzebub considered his master’s words carefully and then said “You wished to rock Christmas world by bringing Santa and Moroz, the two titans, in direct confrontation and enjoy the clash. For that, Krampus, a seasoned expert on darker side of Christmas world, might have been a better choice”.

Devil crushed his unfinished cigar in the ashtray. “Of course I’ll love to see the two greedy scoundrels fighting over a bone” Devil grinned “But not just for pleasure! You haven’t fully understood the project yet”.

Devil paused to drink some bubbling and fuming; amber colored liquid, holding his nose tightly and forcing it rapidly down his throat. Then he resumed “Christmas has rapidly gained a foothold worldwide, but at the expense of the dark world. The dark forces are dwindling in number. Vampires no longer dare to form open societies in Europe and America. Even worshipping me is becoming a taboo! Voodoo culture is declining, and zombies in Caribbean and West Africa are having a tough time.... It is the same sad story everywhere I survey”.

The gloom on Devil’s face cleared slowly and a ray of hope appeared; just like the ray of sunlight appearing behind a dark cloud. “But we can unite all Halloween creatures under my banner in Jack-o-Halloween’s name” Devil said “and a lot of funding will be borne by immensely wealthy Santa Claus and Ded Moroz. Each of them shall maintain huge units of my dark armies, at their own costs, to maintain their cut-throat rivalry!”

“I understand your plans, my Lord; but there is one problem. As far as I am aware, most people associate Jack with evil” Beelzebub said “They dread him like a monster and shudder at the sight of his pumpkin lantern. He is the alleged bad guy. Employing this outsider from the dark world to manipulate the supposed bright Christmas world may expose our own image”.

“You are speaking of good image, eh?!” Devil said in a mocking tone “Don’t you suppose, everybody knows, that your favorite candidate Krampus kidnaps children, and feed on their flesh?” There was an unmistakable tone of sarcasm in Devil’s voice.

Beelzebub fell silent. He seemed nervous and trying to guess what was coming next after this reprimand.

Devil removed his own cap, which revealed two small, goat-like horns, on his head. Then he scratched his thick, black beard and said thoughtfully “You are right. Harmless Jack’s image has become synonymous to a monster!”

Reflecting deeply for some more time, and then becoming serious, Devil said, “Instead of worrying, I should rather spare no effort to magnify this image of Jack. He is exactly what I need. A harmless paper tiger, an eternal adolescent, dreaded as a monster!” He observed Beelzebub’s reaction for a moment and continued, “think in the reverse way. Fear can often accomplish what love can’t”.

The last trace of hope vanished from Beelzebub’s face on hearing this. “But my Lord, it is a very responsible and challenging job, requiring a lot of expertise” Beelzebub said. “If rumors are to be believed, Jack was a village rustic; half illiterate and a drunkard”.

“He is like a lump of steel; awaiting treatment in a forge to become sharpest sword” Devil reacted instantly “You are quite unaware how sharp-witted he really is! He is like a piece of uncut diamond, requiring just cut and polish to shine brilliantly”.

“What about Krampus, my Lord?” Beelzebub stammered.

“Have you made any secret deal with Krampus?” Devil asked bluntly “Have you already taken his bribe, or, expecting a fat commission from him?”

“No my Lord” Beelzebub said with a shocked tone and a pale, bloodless face “I think only about your benefit. Always”.

Devil appeared relieved on seeing the miserable and depressed face of Beelzebub. “Returning back to your question” Devil said, “I intend to appoint Krampus as Jack’s mentor and guide. He will teach Jack about reverse psychology, lessons of diplomacy, the art of running secret organization, and all sorts of useful dark arts. Just watch how I turn this village rustic into a greatest grandmaster”.

“If you had already decided, then why did you ask me to search for candidates?” Beelzebub said in a complaining tone.

“Don’t feel frustrated. Your efforts have not gone in vain” Devil assured “I have gone through your list, and I feel convinced now, that we haven’t missed some better candidate”.

“You really wish to see Jack in a position of power and importance?” Beelzebub said.

“Not really! He shall be in my service” Devil said “I am the owner of his soul. I had ordered him to roam at night till eternity. He has roamed enough like a free bull. Now it is time to put the yoke on his shoulder!”

“But Sir, I think you should consider-”

“Now pay attention to what I say” Devil scolded “I want you to approach Jack, and force him to join my service. Blackmail him if needed. But don’t intimate him anything of our plans” Devil commanded. “He should first learn that I am the boss, and he must be taught to obey orders without questions...and besides, I have some personal scores to settle first”.

Beelzebub looked hesitated, as if unsure whether to stay or to leave. He muttered, “Is it your final decision? I mean, I had not even considered Jack as a candidate for this task. I don’t know much about his bio-data, or about his past!”

“But I do!” Devil said “I met Jack for the first time in a bar in Ireland a long time ago. I remember as if it happened yesterday”.

“And what if, he refuses to join our service?” Beelzebub asked.

“I have already thought about that” Devil said, and pulled out a rolled parchment from his drawer.

“Jack had sold his soul to me” Devil said, “This parchment contains his thumb impression with my red ink”. Devil handed it over to Beelzebub.

From another drawer, Devil pulled out a doll with a face remarkably similar to Beelzebub. Then he took a sack-needle and started playing menacingly with the doll.

Beelzebub’s hand shook, and his face turned pale with horror as he watched on.

“You know the dire consequence of failure; don’t you?” Devil said.

Beelzebub recoiled at the mention of ‘consequence’, just like burnt child recoils on facing a bright candle.

While Beelzebub shuddered, Devil’s eyes turned into glowing charcoal. “Take this parchment-just in case!” Devil said in an ice-cold voice.

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Chapter 7

Devilish Blackmail

Jack was playing a game of ‘snakes and ladders’ with Barbarossa. Jack’s face was brimming with hope at the distinct possibility of winning the game and pocket all the silver coins on the table as he threw the dice.

“Down goes your piece!” Barbarossa said triumphantly “you slipped down right from the verge of victory”.

“What a bad luck!” Jack sighed, as he moved his piece down to the tail of the snake “this only reflects my own horrible fate in my real life” Jack sighed deeply once again.

“Come on Jack, don’t make a mountain out of a molehill” Barbarossa said “There are plenty of ladders as well”.

“My lantern has become the mascot of Halloween around the world, but I am still an unknown figure” Jack spoke with a passion; as if it were the first time he was narrating his sorrow to Barbarossa. “I have never been able to appear in the limelight myself. How horrible my fate is: I am doomed to roam the lonely paths at night till eternity. Curse the Devil!”

No sooner had Jack uttered Devil’s name, there was a knock at the door, and Devil’s henchman Beelzebub appeared. “Jack” Beelzebub said, “Why do you swear in my Lord’s name? Here I am; at your service.” Then he addressed Barbarossa “May I have a private chat with Mr. Jack please?”

Barbarossa left.

“I have overheard some of your laments!” Beelzebub said, “Well, I wasn’t eavesdropping actually. I was just standing outside the door patiently. Some of your laments entered my ears”.

Jack frowned and said “so you were not eavesdropping, eh?!”

“Now don’t be cross Jack. I have come at the right moment, at the right place, with the right offer. I have come to your relief and to fulfill your heart’s desire”.

“If I am not mistaken, you have been sent here by your master, the Devil!” Jack’s voice stiffened “What exactly do you want?”

“My master shall make you the undisputed king of Halloween” Beelzebub made a solemn vow “You shall become as famous yourself as your lantern. But for that to happen, you must follow my instructions blindly. You must join Lord Devil’s service first”.

“So, this is your offer!” Jack sneered, “Is that why you came here?”

“Thank your stars, Jack. You really don't know how lucky you are!” Beelzebub spoke with great enthusiasm “You have been chosen by none other than Lord Devil himself to join his service. It is something anyone would crave for. It is a rare opportunity to prove your true worth.”

“Thanks, but I'm not interested” Jack reacted bluntly.

“It is a really exciting offer. Real worthwhile, I assure you, and...” Beelzebub took out a small, silver snuff-box from his hip pocket and inhaled a pinch of snuff deeply “...as your friend said, there are ladders as well. Try to climb this ladder of success”.

“You ask me to trust Devil?” There was a tone of distrust and hatred in Jack's voice.

“Lord Devil must have felt pity on you, and he's willing to spare you from this eternal punishment” Beelzebub said “Are you not disgusted with your present unchanging situation? Don't you crave for a change Jack?”

“You are a good diplomat, I must admit! You can ask someone to go to hell in such a manner that he will actually look forward for the trip” Jack said with laughter “So what exactly do you suggest Sir Beelzebub?”

“Just sign this document, and you shall be in Lord Devil's glorious service”.

“For how long is this contract?” Jack asked and glanced at the document through the corner of his eye.

“Well ... umm...you see I mean, the expiry date has not been specified, which effectively means indefinitely” Beelzebub faltered momentarily at Jack's unexpected question. Composing himself quickly, he added, “The bright side is, you need not ever fear termination from service or bear the tension of retirement”.

“What?! You mean I shall be his eternal slave! Oh my God!” Jack's jaw fell in astonishment and he gazed at Beelzebub “you are asking me to jump from the frying pan into the fire!”

“You must be joking, dear Jack! How can you label such an incredible offer as enslavement? You are absolutely confused” Beelzebub paused, and pulled out a bottle of whisky from his hip pocket. He opened the lid and offered it to Jack “take a swig, Jack! Your doubts and confusions shall vanish. You shall be able to think more clearly”.

“Thanks, but I won't touch that Devil's liquor” Jack said, “I have completely sobered up”.

“Changes bring opportunity, Jack. Be brave, and grasp the opportunity. Lady Fortune kisses the brave and slaps the cowards”. Beelzebub touched Jack's soft cheek and moved his fingers playfully up to his lips. “Would you prefer the warm kiss of miss fortune, or the icy-cold kiss of misfortune?”

“What if I don't sign this?” Jack said. He had stiffened like a log, and his knuckles tightened, displaying his bold and adamant attitude.

“Of course you will sign it” Beelzebub sneered with deep confidence “unless you were born with brain damage from your mother's womb”. His tone was bitterly caustic “but even then, we know ways of curing this mental disorder called 'obstinacy' completely”.

“Thanks for clarifying!” Jack retorted, “But I am not at all inclined to sign it”.

“Now don't be silly Jack” Beelzebub pulled out the rolled, old parchment from his garment and displayed to Jack “we still have this”.

“Are you threatening me?” Jack said. He was shaking with uncontrollable emotions.

“I am only trying to be reasonable” Beelzebub said “but if you like to see it that way, then so be it”.

“And what if I refuse to sign it?” Jack’s lips were trembling, his face was pale, and his voice didn’t sound like his own.

“Now don’t speak shit like a Jackass, dear Jack” Beelzebub said with a violent outburst of temper “Lord Devil doesn’t like to hear ‘No’ for an answer”

Beelzebub patted Jack’s shoulder softly and said in a friendly, compassionate tone “I might suggest an easy exit. Go to a sea-cliff, fill your lungs to the utmost with fresh air, then take a deep plunge in the deep sea and fill your lungs with brine water”. His tone changed unfriendly and harsh “your only exit is death; drowning will be much less painful than refusing to this offer”.

Jack tried to reply something but failed. He opened his lips twice, but nothing came out. He looked like a fish out of water, gasping for breath.

Beelzebub smiled at him and said, “Take your time Jack! I give you two weeks to decide. And in case you decide to join...which I am sure you will...here is my card.” Beelzebub took out a visiting card and handed it over to Jack.

Jack stared it for some time.

Though Jack had learned to read and write over the years, and was reasonably literate now, he could not read anything.

How could he? The visiting card was blank!

Before Jack could ask anything, he got the answer: “When you start your journey to Lord Devil’s global headquarter at Pandemonium, the card will show the address and direction, one line at a time, and then disappear. And when you reach your destination, it will auto-destruct”.

Before leaving, Beelzebub took out a ‘voodoo’ doll with a face resembling Jack’s and a needle. He jabbed the needle in the doll’s butt.

Jack twitched in excruciating pain and went dancing around madly and rubbing his buttock. But he didn’t let out a single scream of agony.

Beelzebub left triumphantly, allowing Jack plenty of time to rub his butt and decide between the Devil and the deep sea.

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Chapter 8

Jack joins service

It was at this point that Jack desperately wanted to consult the village oracle.

After meeting the cave-dwelling oracle, obtaining her vermillion blessing and the charmed bracelet, and after learning about the prophecy of his unprecedented fame and glory, Jack left for Devil’s headquarters. But it was actually the oracle’s demonstration with boiling hot tea, about the consequences of ignoring Beelzebub’s blackmail that Jack decided to surrender to his doomed fate and join Devil’s service. Jack had realized that having sold his soul to Devil, even drowning himself in the deep sea offered him no exit. It would only ensure the burning of his soul in the embers of hell till eternity.

An impending, terrible misfortune had been predicted by the oracle, which made Jack deeply apprehensive. With his stomach churning with tension, and a thumping heart, Jack proceeded towards Devil’s headquarters.

A rather tall and dark attendant greeted Jack at the gates of Pandemonium.

“Lord Devil has wished to meet you at the Palace stable” he said.

“Meet me at the stable!?” Jack said, staring in wonder.

“Generally he meets all new recruits at the reception hall. But when he is busy with some other activity, he may meet his recruits anywhere- in his puppet show theatre, or in his alchemist lab, or his study room, or even in the dungeon”.

He studied Jack’s face carefully. “Don’t be nervous! He is in a jolly mood. Right now, he is pampering his favorite horses”, the attendant informed “go straight, take a right turn, walk along the hedges and head straight towards the stable”.

“And, best of luck!” he spoke in a loud voice as Jack proceeded along the grassy path towards the stable.

When Jack arrived, Devil was talking to his horse in a low voice and rubbing it gently on the neck. Surrounding Devil were his five attendants; two of them appeared drunk. A strong smell of hay, oat, drying dung and whisky hung in the air. The smell reminded Jack of his own Irish village barnyard. The almost forgotten memories of wild barn dance around a fire flashed in Jack’s mind. Jack compared then and now, and sighed.

“Welcome Jack!” Devil turned around and addressed Jack “I’m so glad to meet you after a long time”. There a cunning smile on Devil’s face, and his voice seemed like a teasing.

Jack’s heart was beating fast. “So what is the job which is assigned to me, Sir?” Jack managed to stammer. He offered his hands for a handshake.

Devil eyed his hand with deep contempt and ignored it. “Ah! Address me as ‘Boss’,” Devil said in a serious tone “or address me as ‘Lord D’ if you like and...” Devil said with a grim face “Never even dare to think of shaking hand with me. We aren’t equals, is that clear?”

Devil paused for some time and scratched his own neck with the handle of the whip he was holding. “Regarding your task, well...you shall soon find it out”. Devil gave Jack a hardened look and continued “But let me make it very clear. We have rules here. Obey them, and your life will be tolerable. Break them, and you will wish you were never born!”

Jack nodded his head and looked down at the ground.

“Strict obedience is absolutely minimum requirement, Jack” Devil continued “I will not...I repeat...I will not tolerate disobedience” Devil shook his index finger at Jack as he spoke. “Is that clear?”

Jack nodded in meek submission and replied, “I shall obey all your orders. Any order!”

“Is it so?” a naughty smile broke out on Devil’s face and he looked around at his attendants, as if he was sharing some joke. “Good! Well then! Let’s see-” Devil pointed his finger at a spade lying on the ground. “Now Jack, pick up the spade and start cleaning up the mound of horse-dung over there”.

Jack hesitated, and looked around him to find Devil’s attendants smiling and grinning. Jack was unable to digest this deep insult and stood there, hesitating and adamant.

“It seems, he require some training” Devil spoke softly as he patted his horse. He offered a carrot to his horse. The horse munched the carrot and neighed loudly. “This is

my favorite horse" Devil announced with a proud look and rubbed the horse's neck with great affection. "When I met this horse for the first time, it was so wild that it won't even allow a saddle or a bridle-it was so wild! Now look...how tame and obedient it has become".

Devil continued caressing his horse "I love this horse. But first one has to break the horse" Devil turned his head slowly, looking at everyone's faces in turns, and then turning back at the horse he screamed "I know how to break a horse!" Devil lifted his whip and struck the horse with such ferocity that flesh tore out of its body and blood squirted out. The horse neighed violently and sprang forward, leaping in the air. As it was tethered to the ground, it lost its balance and fell down. Devil kicked it mercilessly with his iron-spiked boot. Twice! Thrice!

He turned to his attendants and shouted, "Jack needs some training. Drag him to the underground dungeon, and bound him in chains. Not a morsel of food, or a drop of water for two days!"

Instantly the attendants sprang upon Jack and started dragging him away. Devil threw his whip at one of his drunken attendant and shouted "take this with you. And use it well!"

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Chapter 9

The unbreakable vow

Two days later, Jack's head hung down from his shoulder in deep exhaustion. He moaned feebly in extreme pain; his voice was dried with thirst. His hands were chained from the top of two pillars, about six feet apart. His toes barely touched the ground.

Jack's back was scarred with whip marks, with black clots of bloods. Occasionally, a few drops of blood oozed out from his wounds. Jack was so weak that he could barely stand. He fainted repeatedly, murmuring "water...water" almost inaudibly.

Two dungeon guards entered the torture chamber and started removing the chains from Jack's hands. "Looks too bad, buddy" one of them addressed to the other guard "seems like he can't even drag himself, leave alone walking. Let's carry him outside to his waiting friend".

"You are right, chum. If we had arrived here another hour late, we might have wrapped him in shroud, and delivered him to his friend as a nicely packed gift" the other guard replied with a brutal laughter.

* * *

Barbarossa rubbed the medicine soaked cotton on Jack's wounds.

Jack yelled in agony.

"I can't bear it! Ooooo...pleaseee stops it!" Jack screamed.

"A few more moments, Jack" Barbarossa said with deep sympathy "I am trying to be as gentle as possible. Please bear with me".

"Oh, I can't! I can't!...Ooouuch! Oh, my god-"

Tears appeared at the corners of Jack's eyes. He moved his face away.

"Don't hide your tears, Jack! Let them flow-it will relieve some of your sorrows".

"I am nothing but a slave!" Jack moaned.

"Don't lose your heart Jack. Have some patience. Keep your hope alive!" Barbarossa said, as he applied the soothing ointment on Jack's wound, and tried to soothe Jack's heart as well "You will definitely have your rightful place. I have full confidence in you". Barbarossa's eyes glistened with tears as he spoke.

When Barbarossa had finally bandaged Jack's wounds, Jack rose up from his bed and started strolling to and fro, slowly.

"I am afraid; I have some ugly message to deliver, Jack" Barbarossa said "Devil has wished to meet you as soon as possible. He has summoned you next week, for further instructions regarding your job".

"Ooooh that son-of-a-bitch!" Jack fumed, grinding his teeth.

A few moments later he recovered from his burst of anger and stood still, clenching his fist every now and then.

"Jack, my friend" Barbarossa said "Only thing I can say to console you is: Once in service, you may soon get an opportunity to lay your hand on your parchment from Devil's safekeeping and throw it in some wooden fire.....just as you had planned".

"No, Barbarossa. I have changed my mind. Stealing would have been the easiest way to achieve my goal. But I won't try that anymore!"

"What are you saying?"

"I'll obtain that parchment alright, but not as a thief. I'll acquire it openly in a grand manner; just like the way a throne is claimed after defeating the enemy king".

"Are you out of your mind, Jack?"

"I'll take revenge for this inhuman torture. I must make Devil realize the enormity of his fault by turning me into an injured snake" Jack hissed with anger. "And I'll foil Devil's intention behind forcing me to join his service".

"What's his purpose, Jack?"

"I have no idea yet. But we shall find out; soon enough. And, I'll thwart his desires, whatever it is" Jack burst out in anger "I will repay him with his own coins and do him maximum possible emotional damage". Jack grinded his teeth and tried his best to hold back his tears. His voice choked with emotion.

"Now calm down, my dearest friend" Barbarossa said.

"How can I calm down? What have I ever done to deserve all this?" Jack removed one cotton strip to expose one of his jagged whip-mark. A few drops of blood reappeared. "My only crime was yielding to an intense craving for a one time drink and signing Devil's agreement. And, if Devil's skin burned from contact with my crucifix, am I to be blamed? I was trying to prevent him from sending my soul to burning inferno of hell. I didn't mean to have fun by hurting him intentionally".

"But Jack, the earlier you can free your soul, the better! Delay will prolong the overhanging risk. So better to stick to your previous plan"

"Why should I be a petty thief?" Jack paused and frowned "Let Devil realize, against whom he is messing with!"

"But you are powerless as a fledgling" Jack protested, "How can you fight against mighty Devil?"

"What a great fool I had been! I could have built an army of Halloween creatures, long ago" Jack was breathing heavily. "They had all bowed down in submission at my feet. I could have been the powerful master of Halloween world.....not a titular

‘pumpkin king’, but the true ‘Lord of Halloween’that’s my rightful place, something I truly deserve!”

“Of course you truly deserve” Barbarossa consented. He seemed worried by this energetic outburst from Jack, who was feeble and yet to recover from the inflicted wounds.

“Throughout my life, I had ducked away from fame and power,” Jack lamented, “I had been unsatisfied, but felt comfortable to fade into obscurity. Devil could inflict such harsh treatment on me only because I am an underdog”

“I understand your feelings Jack. But don’t underestimate the terrible risks,” Barbarossa said, “Let me drill this point in your skull: Devil still has the parchment. All he has to do is throw it in the burning embers” Barbarossa was frustrated for having to emphasize this point so often. “Doing anything rash is playing with horrible death”.

“Throughout my life I have done nothing extraordinary for which people will remember me” Jack said, “Fate has endowed me with unnaturally long lifespan, almost immortality. But I must do something to become truly immortal; to become greatest legendary person”.

Barbarossa gazed at Jack’s face, possibly wondering whether his friend has turned insane from some inflicted injury to his brain during the torture.

“Those who are forever remembered never die” Jack said. Being forgotten is true death” Jack took a deep breath “The risks of physical death which I face will be a small price to pay for immortality”.

The expression on Barbarossa’s face changed from frustration to an admiring one. He tapped Jack’s shoulder with an approving smile “I feel proud of you Jack. You have forced me to look at things in a new light”.

“Do you believe in me?” Jack asked. He had momentarily forgotten his pains and was brimming with hope.

“Of course I do! From the core of my heart” Barbarossa said “Let me remind you what you told me earlier. The oracle had foreseen your bright future. It’s only a matter of time before you achieve unprecedented fame and glory. You are not some ordinary fellow Jack. Always keep that in mind!”

Jack stared at Barbarossa’s face and spoke with a tone of utmost determination “I shall not submit to my fate. I shall seize every opportunity to rise in power from an underdog. I swear! I take an oath!”

Jack took out the silver crucifix from his pocket, and kissed it. “I make an unbreakable vow” Jack whispered.

“But right now, you must pretend submission” Barbarossa warned “and remember that, when you meet Devil next week”.

“You are right Barbarossa. For the time being, I have to pretend submission” Jack nodded and then whispered absent-mindedly “But what if I can’t control my emotions when I meet him?”

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Chapter 10

The second vow

It started as a minor argument of the ‘Santa Claus couple’, but ran out of control. The arguments turned to quarrel, gathered more steam and reached a bursting point. Hell broke loose that night at ‘Santa Claus Villa’.

“Why the hell do you have to go out at night?” Mrs. Santa demanded angrily from her husband “why can’t you go about distributing presents during daytime?”

“That’s how.... it is... Supposed to be; isn’t it?” Mr. Santa stammered. He looked at his wife’s glowing charcoal like eyes. “I suppose” he said nervously, “I mean” he stammered again “well honey; I have been doing this for as long as I can remember”.

Mr. Santa’s reply seemed to flare up his wife’s suppressed anger. “Whom are you trying to fool?” she thumped the floor with her high-heeled shoe. “You love your nocturnal adventures, don’t you? You meet the ladies of your dreams, while I suffer alone at home!”

“Ladies of my dreams?!” Mr. Santa was stunned, as if falling down from the sky with a mighty thud. “Do you at all have any idea?” Mr. Santa Claus desperately tried to defend “what it takes to go out for my nightly duties?” Santa Claus could not suppress his hurt feeling “A few days ago, I was chased by a hound. And I shudder to remember my agony when I got stuck in a chimney!”

“I see” Mrs. Santa said with bitter contempt “is that why you apply so seductive perfumes before leaving, so that the hounds may be tempted to take a bite of your flesh? Or is it to tempt your ladies to leave more candies and cookies and lots of juicy flesh on the platter?” she looked at her husband with disgust and hatred.

“What are you talking about?” Mr. Santa said, inflamed with irritation. “For decades after decades, you are making my life so miserable” Mr. Santa said in a fit of rising temper “if I can find some moments of peace outside, what’s wrong with that?”

“What’s wrong?” she hissed. She twisted her husband’s nipples so hard that Mr. Santa screamed in agony and his face went red. Then she broke into a sob “Oh what an idiot, un-appreciating fellow was written in my fate! Oh my cursed fate!” she shed big tears, and screamed with enough loudness to awaken the neighbors. “When will he realize that he is undeservingly lucky to have such a beautiful wife?! Oh what a shame! My husband should go out to seek pleasure?”

“Seek pleasure?” Mr. Santa burst out “I talked about going outside to seek peace!”

“Shut up! It’s all the same to me” she shouted and kicked with her high heels on Mr. Santa’s knees. Mr. Santa leapt up with a knee jerk reaction and then tumbled down.

“Speak only when you are asked to” she waved her index finger threateningly at her husband “and don’t interrupt”.

Mr. Santa was rubbing his knee and moaning with pain. Knowing fully well that he has lost the battle, he tried to clam down his wife. “Oh honey, when I return back I am so exhausted and often covered with chimney soot. Doesn’t that convince you of my dedication towards my duty and my innocence?”

“Your exhaustion makes me more doubtful” she snapped “and your blackened face is a nice way to hide the lipstick marks from your cheeks!”

Mr. Santa felt like screaming back, but he feared that it will only escalate matters, and cause the neighbors to arrive in swarms to offer their free counseling. They would advise him ‘wife is always right, even when she isn’t’. And their precious counseling will be offered exclusively to him and not his wife!

Mr. Santa kept his mouth tightly shut; grinded his jaws together in rage and helplessly cursed his own fate. He tried to end the matter there and lick his wounds in privacy. "I am going to bed now" Mr. Santa said with deep remorse "and don't send any dinner for me. I am not feeling hungry".

But Mrs. Santa was equally determined to play her trump card. She started weeping and soaking her handkerchief. "How would you feel if I went missing one night?" she asked with a tone of cold vengeance "Do you think I can't go missing?"

Finding that her husband has not gone down on his half-broken knees, to beg apologies from her, she announced furiously "I had taken a marriage vow of faithfulness and friendship. Now I take a second vow to teach you a suitable lesson".

When Jack arrived, Devil was holding his court.

Jack bowed low as he approached Devil.

"That's good!" Devil announced, looking pleased.

"What is my job assignment, my Lord?" Jack asked.

"First things, first," Devil's tone rose from a whisper to a loud shout in an instant "Guards!"

Seven guards rushed in and encircled Jack and pointed their spears and bayonets at Jack's chest.

"You had used your crucifix smartly with the transformed coin, and during the apple tree incident" Devil said. "But I can't let you repeat. Therefore, take an oath that you shall never use your crucifix again as weapon against me" Devil commanded.

Jack stood motionless.

"Guards!" Devil shouted.

The guards pressed the pointed spears against Jack's ribs. Jack's face twitched in intense pain. Jack grinded his jaws together, but didn't let out a single scream.

"Swear instantly, or they'll plunge them right into your lungs" Devil roared.

Jack stood adamantly.

"Now at the count of three" Devil ordered his guards "puncture his heart".

Devil shook his head like a charging bull. His hairs were looking like the mane of an angry lion.

"One...." Devil said.

Jack's face had turned red with intense pricking pain, and the muscles of his jaws were twitching uncontrollably.

There was stunning silence in the hall. The courtiers bit their fingers in tension, and sweated with apprehension. They watched Jack's disobedience with utter disbelief.

"Two..." Devil shouted.

The suspense grew unbearable with each passing moment. The stunning silence seemed like the calmness before the approaching tornado.

Devil's eyes had turned red with anger. Grinding his teeth, he shouted "and then finally-"

"I swear" Jack said.

"Not like that, my friend...not that way", Devil bellowed "I am sure that you have your crucifix somewhere in your pocket. Hold it in your hand and swear".

Jack writhed in pain, but didn't obey.

"Guards!"

They pressed harder.

Jack put his hand inside his pocket, pulled out his crucifix and held it in his hand. "I swear I'll never attack you with my crucifix". Jack took his second vow within a week after his vow of not submitting to his fate.

"That's better!" Devil said. "Now coming to your question about your assignment.....before joining service, you must undergo some training. I have arranged for your training. Visit 'Black forest' in Germany, and report to you trainer, Krampus. Go with this gentleman". Devil pointed at an ugly looking, greenish goblin. "He'll take care of the rest".

Jack bowed again in silence and departed, walking towards an uncertain destiny.

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Chapter 11

Special Training

"Welcome to this training course. I am 'Maya Sukarno' from Thailand. Ours is an ancient civilization; you must have heard about our land. I am sure; in near future it will become a hot tourist destination. I mean really steaming hot". She gave a proud look.

"Anyway, I am glad to introduce this training course..." the young lady continued her announcement "...I will introduce you briefly about the history of spying, before handing over to my colleagues for covering the rest" she addressed the class in a loud hissing voice, attracting a lot of attention to herself.

She ignored the gazing eyes by turning away her face, preferring to study the garden instead, through the iron bars of the classroom window.

"I had done my specialization in 'oriental spying techniques'" she said, "I have a long, practical experience in spying myself".

Jack gazed at her; trying to figure out how long experience she might possibly have considering her age. Jack thought she looked young and charming in her Sari and her long, silky black hairs. And her black eyes were hypnotizing.

"Ladies and gentlemen, before we begin, can anyone tell me about the history of spying?"

Several hands shot up instantly, which she ignored completely.

"Spying is not a glamorous 'cloak and dagger job' as you might expect" she said, "It requires a lot of training, intelligence and patience. It is a profession as old as human civilization itself, and often considered as the second oldest profession. She oldest one is of course politics".

"But madam" someone objected "I heard that the oldest profession-"

"Shut up" she hissed angrily "or I'll break this birch rod on your back".

She observed the class slowly and silently, spotting Jack. "If I am not mistaken, you are 'Jack-o-Halloween', right?"

"Yes madam".

"It is indeed a great honor for me to have you as my student" she announced jubilantly. Coming down from the podium, she stood beside Jack's desk.

"Are you planning to attend the entire course?" she asked while fondling Jack's hair to feel the soft-silky texture.

"Yes madam. And lots more too" Jack answered, blushing.

“You will attend other courses too? Which ones?” she asked in a tone of amazement, while caressing Jack’s broad shoulders and looking impressed.

“Many courses” Jack said “Management courses, martial arts, courses in diplomacy, sword fighting, and horse riding...I mean all the courses offered by Krampus”.

“Wow! That’s great”. She gazed at Jack with her eyes wide open. She composed herself, shut her open mouth and went back to the lectern. “Now, silence pleaseee...” she hissed.

Even after she stopped speaking, the hissing sound seemed to persist from her oversized ‘lady’s handbag’. Some of the students eyed it apprehensively.

She got up, walked to the door, closed it and locked the doorknob. She tied the key ring to her hair and then tied her hair in a big knot.

“Let me demonstrate one of the ancient oriental espionage techniques” she looked at Jack with an interest in her eyes. Then she pulled out a white rabbit and a hissing bamboo-cane basket from her handbag.

Jack was having a strange sensation that she was trying to impress him.

She opened the lid of her basket. Instantly a coiled cobra raised its hood and started swaying, hissing violently. She held the rabbit. The cobra struck it with lightning speed.

She held the rabbit high for all to see. The rabbit trembled and convulsed, screeching and squeaking like a mouse. Fumes appeared in its mouth, and its color turned pale bluish. Within a few moments, the rabbit became motionless.

She pulled out the cobra from the basket with her bare hand and let it down on the floor. It slithered slowly towards the horror struck students. Panic spread instantly; the students screamed and stood up on their desks, trembling with fear.

She laughed loudly, picked up the snake, managed to place it on her palm and raised her palms at her face level. The snake swayed its hood, selecting a spot to strike. She held out her tongue and started moving her tongue to and fro. The cobra struck on her tongue.

“She has been bitten by a deadly poisonous snake. Call the doctor!” a lady student screamed at the top of her voice.

“Ah, calm down” she rebuked dryly “and please get down and occupy your seats”.

She placed the cobra inside the basket and closed the lid.

She took out the register and started calling roll numbers. Jack nervously watched that all the horror struck eyes were fixed on her. Jack sweated in horror himself, expecting her to collapse at any moment.

When the attendance was over, she closed her register triumphantly and announced, “All fifty three students are present. Everyone seems to be interested in my class” she spoke in a hissing tone.

“This is one of the oriental espionage techniques” she explained “Creating ‘poison girls’ by administering snake venom, in increasing dose over several years, to develop resistance towards venom” she announced. “Now, can anyone tell me why I didn’t collapse?”

She ignored all raised hands and announced “Because, being brought up as a ‘poison girl’ since my childhood, it’s not snake’s venom, but the warm embrace of my man which makes me collapse”.

“But madam, what purpose will this technique serve in spying?”

“Good question. Well, not particularly useful for spying, but great for assassination purpose—an essential part of espionage. Poison girls can easily reach Kings and Generals, where armed assassins can’t reach. Even a deep kiss can be fatal”.

She turned her face from the questioning lady and faced the other half of the class at the assembled young and adolescent men. She asked in a taunting voice “Would anyone like to kiss my lips?”

* * *

The week proved really hectic for Jack. *So many courses have been crammed in such a short period of six months!* Jack thought. He was having a difficult time remembering the names of so many new faces. The number of students per class varied from a dozen to around hundred depending on the subject.

Jack was having a really tight schedule rushing from one campus to another, spread over such a vast geographical area of the Black forest. “I must learn as much as possible, for using them later” Jack swore umpteenth time, as he rushed to attend the next lecture.

By now, Jack’s initial opinion of ‘a barbarian Krampus in goatskin’ had changed, and he was truly impressed by spymaster Krampus’s massive network of secret training schools. His own heart forced him to believe about Krampus’s complex spy networks in the past, all over Eastern Europe, his secret ‘clubhouses’ and ‘safe houses’ and other stuffs he heard from his newly formed friends. *Krampus is definitely not the wild barbarian; I thought previously*, Jack concluded.

Jack’s appetite for learning increased with the progress of every subject. There is so much to learn Jack thought. On one particular class in ‘ancient spying techniques’, a Turkish teacher with a long pointed beard and wearing a turban, passed a small bowl of rice and a large tray to one of the student.

Then he said, “Pour the rice from the bowl into the tray, and examine carefully. Very minutely! Tell me if you notice something really unusual”.

The student examined for several minutes, almost straining his eyes and said “Sir, the sizes of the grains somewhat varies. And some of the grains are broken. There are a few bran and grains of sand”.

“Pass the tray to the next student please” the teacher said with a tone of disappointment.

The next student confirmed the findings after a long time. So did the next student in the row.

“Pass it on,” the teacher said, but now with a voice of triumph.

“Now take this magnifying glass and observe carefully,” the teacher said.

Soon enough the student announced excitedly “Sir I have spotted one very unusual grain of rice. It is much different from the rest, as if some inscription appears on it”

The Turk teacher smiled and took out a much larger magnifying glass from his long Turkish robe. Handing it over to the student, he said, “This is much powerful magnifier. Now study it”.

The student took a few minutes to break the silence of the class “Oh my God! An entire poem has been inscribed on it!”

The teacher looked at everybody and saw the disbelief on his or her faces. “Pass the grain and the magnifier to the next student”.

After it had passed hands through the whole class, the teacher said, “Rice Writing is the art of writing on single grain of rice. It might have originated in Anatolia in ancient

Turkey. There are artisans who are skilled in drawing entire painting on this small grain. And it is very handy to transmit secret military messages, even of the size of a large rhyme. Tomorrow I shall tell you more about some other extraordinary spying techniques of Ottoman Turks”.

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Chapter 12

Punishment

Jack was listening to the lecture on ‘Diplomacy in Politics’ with keen interest, when a class attendant arrived and interrupted the class. He whispered something in the teacher’s ears.

“Jack!” The teacher called out aloud “come here”.

“Yes Sir?”

“Krampus has wished to meet you immediately. Go with this man”.

Ten minutes later, Jack entered Krampus’s office.

“Jack, how are your lessons progressing?”

“Fine, Sir!”

“Just fine?” Krampus glanced hard “That’s absolutely disappointing. Disgusting! Can’t it be finer?” Krampus hardened his tone and grumbled “think not of taking a rest till fine becomes finest; just as Lord Devil demands of you from me”.

Jack stood bewildered, wondering what was happening. If Krampus had interrupted Jack’s lessons, just to reprimand him to be more attentive, then Jack could not make any sense out of it. Jack remained wary of something else popping out of the bag.

“I hope, at least you enjoy your studies” Krampus scolded Jack, just like a schoolmaster scolds a spoilt child.

“Yes Sir. It’s a bit hectic though”.

“Nonsense!” Krampus punched hard on the table “if I had my way, I’d have allowed only one day off each month. Trainees become lazy unless they are whipped left and right mercilessly”.

Krampus signaled the attendant to leave. Jack watched the class attendant leaving with apprehension.

“Now listen to me, Jack. Lord Devil has sent this edict for your signature” he held up a thick bundle of papers “Sign it quickly, and return to your class. I don’t want to interrupt your lessons”.

Jack held the bundle and glanced at it. The topmost paper seemed to be premium quality bond paper bearing the inscriptions:

~~~~~  
By this edict, it is hereby decreed that Count Bramacula, of the clan of Eastern Gothic Vampires, and present chief, shall abdicate all claims to the throne of Balkan Vampires. He shall relinquish all special privileges and discretionary powers to Prince Vlad Stoker, the nominated candidate of Lord Devil.

Further, in view of the loss of valuable blood in fighting each other, both parties are hereby instructed to stop the bloodshed (bloodsucking exempted) with immediate effect. They must abide by the (attached) guidelines, till further orders are issued.

This decree has been issued by Jack-o'-Halloween and has the approval and seal of Lord Devil.

Signed (Jack-o-Halloween):

Countersigned (Lord Devil):

(Great Seal of Pandemonium)

~~~~~  
Jack held the bunch of papers, standing motionless and dumbstruck for some time. When he had finally composed himself, he stammered "I...I don't get this...I didn't issue any decree".

"Of course you didn't" Krampus agreed smilingly, displaying his terribly sharp, and unnaturally long teeth "It is Lord Devil who wants to issue this decree".

"No, I don't get this...has a rivalry started between Gothic and Romanian Vampires?"

"It's not your task to dig out such information!" Krampus said, "Just sign it and go attend your classes"

"But Sir, who am I to issue a decree like this. I am a mere student".

"Don't try to be over-smart. You know very well who you are!" Krampus replied, shaking his long, curved horns menacingly, displaying his animalistic temper "all Halloween creatures regard you as their spiritual leader".

"This is a Lord Devil's plan, isn't it?" Jack said "Interfering in vampire politi-"

"Mind your own business Jack!" Krampus snapped furiously. His cat-like pupils narrowed further, looking like two black slits on his yellow eyes.

"Of course it is my business to know, if I am to put my signature".

"Now look here Jack! Lord Devil is a man of principles. Otherwise, I don't see any reason why he simply couldn't have forged your signature without taking the trouble of getting your signature. You must respect his honesty, and reciprocate accordingly. Just sign it, and the matter is over".

"At least, allow me to read the attached guidelines, Sir".

"Read those entire bunch of documents?! Do you think, my valuable time is not worth a penny, so you can waste it?"

"Please Sir, just give me one night. I'll return all these documents tomorrow morning".

"Will you sign it blindly or not? I have lost my patience-I am warning you Jack!" Krampus was shivering with rage and drops of blood appeared on the deep scar mark on his forehead.

"But Sir, how can I put my signature blindly? I had a really bad experience in the past-"

"I don't know, and I don't want to know about your bad past experience..... Guards!" Krampus shouted at the top of his voice "...all I know is that you are going to have a bad experience now!"

Three guards appeared instantly, and pounced upon Jack.

"Throw him in Ludwivor prison!" Krampus roared.

"Excuse me Sir" one of the guards objected, "Ludwivor is already crammed and overcrowded. An epidemic has broken out in those unhygienic cells. We are shifting many of the lucky surviving captives to 'sector 61' camp".

“Okay then! Off he goes to ‘sector 61, hard labor unit’ ...” Krampus said “and in case, he changes his mind within just three days, then send me a note. Or else...” Krampus paused between every word to emphasize his intention “Let him rot there indefinitely”.

They dragged Jack, and threw him like a sack of potatoes inside a caged horse carriage, and slammed the iron door. The three gigantic black horses, with glowing red eyes and breathing smoke and fire, galloped away the carriage out of view, raising a storm of dust.

* * *

In sector 61, hard labor camp, Jack was appalled to see thousands of child labors being flogged and forced to do highly laborious jobs. They were kicked and whipped as mercilessly as the adult prisoners. A barbed fence separated the children from adults. Jack, though apparently an adolescent in his late teens, was placed with the children.

“They are those unlucky children whom Krampus and his men have kidnapped from their homes” Jack’s prison mate whispered to him “agents of Krampus roam around the world, especially around Christmas, in search of ‘naughty children’, as they like to call them. Here, they don’t allow adults and children to mix. Even parents are not allowed”.

Jack spent the day serving his allotted laborious jobs and making observations and cautious enquiries.

As dusk was approaching, a horse drawn carriage arrived and carried away seven children and three men.

“Where are they being taken?” Jack questioned his prison mate.

“No idea” Jack’s prison mate replied in a shivering voice “Every three or four days, they pick up prisoners. Nobody ever hears anything about them later”.

Jack looked at his prison mate’s face and saw the horror in his eyes. “Are you all right Davy?”

“I suppose, I am fine”.

“What’s the matter?” Jack asked.

Davy lowered his voice “There are rumors that these prison camps are run by Lord Devil, and he ships those unfortunate prisoners to ogres of Iceland”.

“To the ogres of Iceland?” Jack repeated in disbelief “I have heard tales of their cannibal leader ‘Gryla’, who ate her own former husbands”.

They were both startled by the noise of a whistle.

Jack watched the children in tattered rags lining up in a long queue for their meager ration of thin gruel. A small child, who appeared to be starving to death, broke from the queue and ran towards the serve table.

One of the prison guards grabbed the child by the shoulder and dragged him aside. The guard took off the child’s torn and stitch-marked shirt and held him securely, while another guard flogged the child mercilessly.

Jack turned away his face and hid his tears. He couldn’t bear to look any longer. But the shrill, painful cries of the child still pierced through Jack’s ears and shred his heart to pieces. He heard the guard shouting “Don’t give that little brat anything to eat today. They must be taught discipline”

I can’t bear to stay anymore Jack thought *I wish I could help them escape. But now, I must send a note to Krampus to get out of this hell.*

Jack approached a guard and said “I want to send a note to Krampus. Urgently”.

The guard broke into laughter.
“What happened?” a second guard asked the first one.
“He wants to send a note to Krampus”.
Both started laughing loudly.
“What’s the matter?” Jack asked, “What’s funny about it?”
They started collapsing from peals of laughter, holding each other for support.
When the laughter finally subsided, the guard said to Jack “You have not heard I suppose?”
“Heard what?”
“Our prison superintendent got so flooded with regular appeals of innocence from stupidly hopeful prisoners, that he had issued an order which strictly forbids the forwarding of silly notes.
“But mine is a genuine case, and very urgent” Jack said.
“Shut up!” The guard raised his hands “or I’ll deform your face with a hard slap”.

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Chapter 13

Life is a rough journey

True to her threat to her husband, Mrs. Santa indeed went missing.
Mr. Santa Claus could have put a ‘missing’ poster with his wife’s face in every home, advertised on the front page of dozens of newspapers, informed the electronic media for circulating the news far and wide...but he was helpless.
The reason was simple. A series of love letters from Mr. Santa’s rival ‘Ded Moroz’ was found from Mrs. Santa’s personal drawer during preliminary investigation. Some of them even had Moroz’s signature and the postscript ‘From Russia with Love’. Therefore, Mr. Santa’s close ones only gossiped and grumbled in a helpless tone.

And on top of that, the waiter dark elf that served breakfast at the ‘Black-Sea resort conference’ swore that he had often seen ‘Ded Moroz’ meeting Mrs. Santa secretly at night when Mr. Santa went out for distributing gifts. He disclosed under interrogation that both of them had met secretly the previous night as well. “She must have run away with him,” the elf said, as if his explanation was absolutely essential to crack this impossible puzzle.

Mr. Santa Claus hung his head in shame and tried helplessly to suppress the whole affair. He cursed his stars for making his old age such a rough journey. People whine about midlife crisis; but his end-life crisis was nothing short of a horrifying roller coaster ride.

Friends and well-wishers of Mr. Santa Claus tried their best to suppress the news. Mr. Ruprecht, the personal secretary-cum-manager of Santa Claus spread the news that Mr. Santa’s wife had visited her mother on a long duration.

Of course it was an elaborate lie! Mr. Santa’s mother-in-law was long dead. And what’s more, she and the ‘Santa couple’ hadn’t even spoken for decades till her death. Her face would have been the last thing Mr. Santa might have wished to see. This may not be said with so certainty for Mrs. Santa, but she hadn’t visited her mother even on her deathbed.

Mr. Ruprecht tried his best to convince people with his lie, and save his master from disgrace. But when he met his close friend Mr. Jingeling, the keeper of the keys to Santa's workshop, he confided the truth. Ruprecht proudly boasted of his 'damage control' technique to save Santa's reputation. Then Ruprecht shook his head remorsefully and whispered "Oh how shameful! Who expected this from Mrs. Santa; especially at this old age? She made people laugh!"

Mr. Jingeling shook his head even more vigorously and said, "I too feel like dying of shame!" He gave out a deep and loud sigh like a bull, and strongly denounced this shameful action. But the very next moment, he asked in an excited tone "Since when was this secret love affair going on? Didn't the fat-headed Santa ever doubt his wife?" Sensing a hot topic for lively gossip, he adjusted the large key ring with all the keys for Santa's workshop on his wide black belt and occupied his seat firmly. The exciting topic glued him to his seat, or rather, rooted him on the spot.

It was finally over. Jack completed six months of rigorous training with flying colors. Jack felt relief and hoped for some well-earned rest. After the graduation ceremony, Krampus called Jack at his office.

"Congratulations Jack! You have done well" Krampus said with a wicked smile "now you must be dying for the next phase".

"For what sir?" Jack said warily, hoping desperately that there won't be fresh headache.

"You must have been informed that you have to complete two months of practical training elsewhere, before joining Lord Devil's service" Krampus said "Any question Jack?"

"Where shall I be posted?"

"As part of the 'foreign study-tour program' you shall be placed in Iceland, the world capital of the Elves, under the guardianship of 'Gryla'-the mother of Yule Lads".

"Under the ogress 'Gryla'?" Jack said, recovering from a shock. The picture of ogress 'Gryla' happily munching the raw flesh of her own slaughtered husband had flashed in Jack's mind. Hiding his emotions instantly, Jack continued, "But Sir, I heard that the political situation is very tense there".

"Hah! Your service agreement specifically mentioned that you may be placed anywhere for practical training" Krampus said bluntly, "That means your placement may not necessarily be in your native Ireland, but in Iceland as well! And regarding political turmoil...remember Jack...rough sea makes good sailor. And for this specific purpose, we have intentionally selected Iceland"

"May I request another destination?" Jack said "any other destination".

"You think I'll entertain your request?" Krampus snapped. Without waiting for a reply from Jack, Krampus said, "So, that's it. That is final".

Krampus ticked off Jack's name in the list, and scribbled something in his goatskin notepad. "Presently, Iceland is ruled jointly by ogres & trolls of 'Gryla' and by Lord Devil" Krampus said "Both of them consider it their holy duty to civilize the barbarian elves".

How can the cannibalistic, wild ogres civilize the elves, whose civilization is several millennia old? Jack thought that's a joke-a dirty one.

Krampus looked sternly at Jack and said, "The elves must be tamed. They must be taught law and order. And your job will be trying to ruthlessly impose Devil's rule for the prosperity of Elf-land".

Law and order will be taught by Devil's men and the trolls, who know only plundering and killing? Jack thought in disgust.

Krampus continued, "You'll have ample opportunity to assess the fragile political scenario, and try some of the diplomacy tricks in Lord Devil's favor. And you will love your stay at 'Gryla's residence'; her hospitality is legendary".

Jack shuddered to think of Gryla's hospitality. He felt absolutely nauseating being force-fed this bullshit of lies. He felt hateful and angry with himself for having to keep his mouth tightly shut, and nodding now & then in silent consent.

"You should not be a mere observer, but try to manipulate and exploit the hostile scenario" Krampus said in a warning tone "the Elves have grown restless and want to attain freedom. But they should get what they deserve" Krampus displayed his middle finger in an offensive manner. "You shall be allowed to make a few public speeches. Tell them that without Devil, there is no hope for Elfland, and all those rumors about the royal scepter—" Krampus paused suddenly.

Jack felt that Krampus was trying to hide some important dark secret.

"Your oratory skills and leadership abilities shall be graded based on your convincing power and public impact." Krampus said "So it's my advice, and in your best interest to urge the Elves to give up their impractical and fancy idea of an independent state. Convince them to support the triumvirate ruling alliance of ogres and trolls, gnomes and goblins, and Lord Devil".

Krampus got up and shook Jack's hand "Rest assured, Jack. It is really a challenging opportunity".

Jack felt offended at Krampus's hurried manner of saying 'goodbye', as if he was trying to get rid of Jack.

"You shall have insight to some of the inner working of 'Elf spy network'-one of the best spy networks in the world" Krampus said "Even Lord Devil hasn't been able to crack their secret 'orange code'. If you succeed in cracking, then Lord Devil can crush the rebel Elves under his boots. And needless to mention, it will bring glory to my training school and a mighty boost to your own career. Best of luck, Jack! And remember always: 'rough sea makes a good sailor'".

* * *

The vessel hit the rough sea. A low pressure had formed in the treacherous North Atlantic, near the coast of Iceland, and their ship was heading right into the eye of the cyclone.

Strong gale turned into a mighty storm and the wooden ship was tossed like a tiny cork in boiling water. For the first time in his long life, Jack saw such huge waves-as high as the mast of the ship! Each gust of wind sprayed icy cold water on the crew.

The storm raged throughout the day and became even more violent as darkness fell. The captain tried to instill courage among the crew by announcing, "We are reaching the coast. Maybe we are within fifteen or twenty nautical miles".

But reaching the coast of Iceland seemed an impossible dream.

As the ship swayed violently, Jack looked more remorseful than afraid. "Why did I allow Barbarossa to come with me?" he muttered to himself repeatedly.

The dense fog had made the visibility almost zero. Darkness shrouded the raging ocean like a black cloak.

A shrill whistle entered Jack's ears. Moments later, he was hurled headlong on the sofa. The wooden ship had hit a rock, jutting its head above the waves. With a crashing sound, the ship was shattered into pieces.

Struggling against the gigantic waves, Jack somehow managed to remain afloat in the icy chill water. He saw the huge mast of the ship, being tossed about. He gathered all his energy to swim towards the mast.

But he found to his horror that the mast was drifting away faster. In an instant of lightning flash, Jack saw someone already clinging to the mast, and two other crewmembers clinging to floating wooden debris. But he couldn't identify the faces.

Moments later, everything around was again engulfed in total darkness and big drops of torrential rain came lashing against his face.

Jack realized that his limbs had started to refuse moving anymore. *It's now or never!* Jack made a last desperate attempt for the floating mast.

Jack managed to swim to the floating mast and grasped it. He tied himself to the mast.

In a lightning flash, he saw Barbarossa and another crewmember, struggling madly towards floating wrecks before losing his consciousness out of exhaustion.

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Chapter 14

Vagaries of fate

Many of Santa's own dissatisfied elf workers got a golden chance. They started spreading the hot news of Mrs. Santa-Moroz affair and her elopement and so on, adding salt and spices. All sorts of rumors, speculations and new theories could be heard with each passing day.

Rather than dying out over time as Mr. Santa's well-wishers had hoped, the topic became hotter. Many of the gossiping elves eagerly enquired any passerby or a complete stranger to get the latest update of this must-know development! Needless to mention, the other person also becomes equally anxious to know more. Two plus two makes four. Therefore, despite all suppression efforts by Santa's trusted men, the news soon spread to all corners of the Christmas world.

Soon Mr. Santa Claus became a laughing stock in the Christmas world. Even 'Dominique', the talking Christmas donkey, laughed and brayed uncontrollably, rolling on the ground and throwing its limbs at the sky. Mr. Santa Claus woke up to the harsh truth that his strategy had failed miserably. He had enough and decided to take action. He sent one of his trusted elves as messenger to Ded Moroz, with a demand to send back Mrs. Santa back immediately.

The messenger elf returned back, bringing with him not Mr. Santa's wife, but a human-sized, gnome messenger of Ded Moroz. Then the Santa's elf left, allowing Mr. Santa to have a private discussion with Moroz's messenger.

"Why didn't Ded Moroz send back my wife?" Mr. Santa demanded angrily.

"How can he?" Moroz's messenger replied, "When he doesn't even know where she is!"

“I don’t believe that!” Mr. Santa snapped. “I have strong evidence that he has eloped with my wife sinfully”.

“Of course not!” Moroz’s gnome replied, flapping his long, pointed ears “In fact Ded Moroz was stunned when he heard about this sad event. Moroz said ‘I am too surprised that Mr. Santa can’t even manage his own wife. He may not be able to keep her satisfied at his old age’. Yes that’s exactly what he said”.

“Shut up!” Mr. Santa shouted. He was mad with anger at what he heard.

“Mr. Ded Moroz has sent me to express his deep condolence” the gnome messenger said “I have been sent not merely as a messenger, but as his representative as well”.

“Allow me to offer my personal consolation as well” the gnome continued, without caring about Mr. Santa’s angry face. He lowered his tone and said “Let me give you a valuable, friendly advice, dear Santa”. His tone dropped further to a whisper, and his lips almost touched Mr. Santa’s ear “You can never trust your wife nowadays. The moment you are out of sight, they start deceiving you. She will ditch you at the first opportunity, and run away with someone handsome and younger”.

Mr. Santa’s anger got rekindled into a roaring flame by those ‘friendly advice’. He felt sure that Moroz had deliberately sent this rascal just to rub pinches of salt and chilly pickles on his wound. Mr. Santa might have shouted with biting scorn “Who is this handsome and young fellow? White bearded Ded Moroz I suppose!” But for some reason known only to him, he kept his mouth tightly shut.

“You should have kept a sharp eye on her activities, rather than turning a blind eye” the gnome continued “blind faith can really turn you blind”.

Mr. Santa’s face turned red with shame and anger, just like the color of the nose of his reindeer ‘Rudolph’. “I have never seen my wife with any secret lover” Mr. Santa said. His tone sounded like a desperate attempt to avoid disgrace.

Moroz’s representative smiled and said, “Do you think she would have met her lover in front of you, to keep you a witness? What a damn fool you are!” Then he took out a betel leaf and put some crushed betel nuts along with some spiced chewing tobacco and put it in his mouth. He chewed it leisurely, closing his eyes and enjoying the aroma. A sweet aroma of the flavored tobacco spread across the room, as saliva drooled out of the gnome’s mouth.

All of a sudden, the gnome spitted out the tobacco mixed saliva on the marble floor and said, “If you can’t control your wife, the society will spit on your face like that”.

Mr. Santa recoiled with disgust at this absolutely unacceptable behavior. He clenched his fist; stamped his boot on the floor. “I am asking for the last time” Santa Claus shrieked “will Ded Moroz return my wife peacefully or not?”

“I am awfully sorry” the humanoid gnome said, “you ask for something which is utterly impossible”.

“Get out!” Mr. Santa screamed “out!”

As soon as Moroz’s gnome crossed the threshold, Mr. Santa threw his boot at the door. “There! That’s for your rascal master Ded Moroz”. He was shivering with rage. “I’ll never forget this deepest insult, Ded Moroz! Never, as long as I live!” Mr. Santa Claus took a solemn oath.

Meanwhile, in Devil's camp, there was jubilation. Devil offered a handful of gold coins to the dark elf, who swore to Mr. Santa about the secret love affairs of his wife. Then Devil patted Beelzebub's shoulder and said, "I am proud of you".

"And these are the letters which did the trick" Beelzebub displayed the fake love-letters bearing Moroz's name "I kept copies before having them tucked under Mrs. Santa's pillow and in her box".

"Well done" Devil said and handed him a diamond ring from his own finger.

* * *

A week later, Mr. Santa's wife returned with Mr. Sinterklaas, the cousin of Mr. Santa.

Mr. Sinterklaas looked worried; fearing his cousin's suspicion and anger may fall on him. In fact, Mr. Sinterklaas had nothing to do with all these events; it was Mrs. Santa who had paid a surprise visit to his castle in Southern Spain.

"What a drama you had created here by disappearing without any information!" Mr. Santa burst out at his wife.

"Is it?" she replied "Now do you understand how I feel when you go out for your nightly pleasures?" she returned back all the anger like a tennis ball right into Mr. Santa's court.

"Nightly pleasures?!" Mr. Santa fumed with anger. "For the last time I am telling you; it's my nightly duties which I perform faithfully".

The debate returned back to square one. As the intensity of the quarrel increased, Mr. Sinterklaas felt relieved that things were indeed returning back to normalcy. After all, Mr. Sinterklaas knew the 'Santa Claus couple' intimately.

Mr. Sinterklaas might have been right, if that is how normal husband-wife relation should be. But the relation between Mr. Santa Claus and Ded Moroz was permanently strained by this incident.

* * *

Jack felt warm as he opened his eyes. He was lying on the sandy beach under the bright morning sun.

"Hurray! He has opened his eye," someone shouted.

Jack looked around and saw several fishermen. He got up on his feet slowly. He saw his friend Barbarossa sitting near the drying fishing net, and waving gently at him. He saw two of the crew still lying unconscious on the ground.

"What happened to the other men?" Jack asked the nearest fisherman.

"Only four of you might have survived. Thank your stars; you have survived such a terrible storm" the fisherman replied, and raised his hands to heaven for a short prayer.

The other fishermen came close to Jack and asked, "What is your name? Where do you want to go?"

Jack placed his hand inside his pocket. He realized to his horror that his purse containing Krampus's letter to Gryla was gone! Devoured by the hungry waves!

It took several seconds for Jack to recover from the shock. Then he said, "Call me Jack. And that's my friend Barbarossa. We want to go to the ogress Gryla, among the ravines and caves of the mountains of Iceland".

The fisherman stared at each other with horror in their eyes.

One fisherman broke down, sobbing "Oh my son! My only son!" he wailed "our bread earner!"

“What’s the matter?” Jack was perplexed “I only said where I wanted to go”.
The oldest one among them spoke to Jack in a trembling voice “Are you mad?”
* * *

After two days of travelling on foot and mountain climbings, Jack, Barbarossa and their guide reached the granite colored track leading up the mountainside.

“Sorry, I’ll go no further” Jack’s guide said, “You walk along this mountain path, and cross that range. You will reach the valley of trolls and ogres”.

“Thank you my friend. You are a good guide” Jack said, as he handed two gold coins.

“I am not taking this money out of greed. I am a mountain guide, not a mountebank” the guide shook his head remorsefully “I am a poor man, with a large family to support. Otherwise I would have never accepted this money to lead you to the mouth of death”.

* * *

Several hours later, Jack and Barbarossa were walking through a narrow valley, along a fast flowing stream.

All of a sudden, raising war cry, a dozen mountain trolls and ogres came rushing down like avalanche along the mountain slope.

Barbarossa gripped the hilt of his sword in alarm, drawing his sword partly out of the sheath.

“Don’t!” Jack warned.

Within moments, the trolls and ogres came directly upon them, encircled them, and snatched their backpacks and weapons. They were eleven in number, and were dressed in fur, and carrying stone maces.

“We mean no harm” Jack said loudly “We have come here to meet Gryla”

They stared at each other’s face and then broke into laughter.

“Matuna!” the leader of the group shouted, hungrily licking his lips and looking at the others “Mussipi. Dora, doga Mussipi”.

“What are they talking about?” Barbarossa asked with a trembling voice.

“No idea” Jack shrugged his shoulder.

“Mussipi!” “Mussipi!” the other trolls shouted loudly. Two trolls came forward and seized both of them.

“What will they do with us?” Barbarossa asked in horror.

“Sorry, can’t say” Jack answered in a resigned and apprehensive tone.

The leader of the group ordered “Ol pasinto Gryla masupas” and started walking.

The others started following him, dragging Jack and Barbarossa with them.

“Where are they taking us?” Barbarossa said.

Jack said nothing.

* * *

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